

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a red off-the-shoulder dress with a gold belt, stands in a garden filled with red roses. The background is a dense thicket of roses, creating a romantic and elegant atmosphere.

CAPTIVATING
COUNTESSSES



BOOK 2

Almost a Countess

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNA JAXON

A lone woman can be ready for almost anything...

Exiled to a lonely estate in north Yorkshire, Dora Harper finds life satisfying, if appallingly routine—until an escaped Scottish prisoner begs for her help. Despite her misgivings, Dora takes him in, feeds and clothes him, and is amazed at his transformation into a very handsome, virile gentleman, who claims he is an earl. No matter who he really is, his very presence in her house could ruin her reputation for good. Trouble is, Dora might not mind that at all.

Phineas “Finn” MacDonald, the Earl of Aberfoyle, is on the run from a troop of soldiers bent on charging him with treason. Dora’s miraculous appearance is a godsend for him, in more ways than one. The pretty young English woman is kind, compassionate, and willing to help him in his attempt to seek justice and evade the troop that is quickly closing in on him.

With their close proximity over several days, Finn’s desire to escape wanes, even as thoughts of Dora fill his mind. So when a unique opportunity presents itself, Finn claims to be Dora’s husband to save her reputation and throw the soldiers off his trail. Now all Finn needs to do is persuade Dora to make the ruse a reality—before the soldiers can find him and carry out the grim penalty for his alleged crime.

Almost a Countess

By Jenna Jaxon

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Jenna Jaxon

Published by Jenna Jaxon

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Dedication

To Patti

*For all your help, support, and encouragement for my
writing*

these many years at the cabin.

My heartfelt thanks for everything.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank all those (and there have been many) who have helped me along the way in writing this book: Alex Christle, Emily Boisseau, Ellie Boisseau, Wayne Tucker, Valerie Bowman, and my long-suffering husband, Rudy Boisseau. Their help comes in many different forms, but especially this time for just being there for me when I needed someone to talk to, or ask a question about random topics, or blow off steam. A special thanks to my family for allowing me a lot of time to simply put my head down and write.

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Chapter 1

Yorkshire, Mid-August 1762

The coolness of the early morning had worn off before Dora Harper had traveled half the distance to Mr. Hawkins's tenant farm on the southwest corner of her father's estate. She'd left just as dawn was breaking, as was her habit, however, the August sun had decided to shine bright and hot from the moment it cleared the horizon today. Her sky-blue riding habit clung close to her arms and back while perspiration dappled her neck. Perhaps a short rest down by the creek bed just yonder would cool both Gretchen's hooves and her own face.

"Come along, Gretchen." She pulled the horse down from a spirited canter to a trot and then a walk. "Let's rest a few minutes before continuing on to visit Mrs. Hawkins and her new little one."

As though Gretchen understood, she slowed even further as she took a slight path down the gentle slope of the creek bed to finally stand in the middle of the stream under the shade of the trees. Gretchen stretched her neck down to sip the rushing water.

Dora patted her horse's neck. "Good girl."

Water sounded good to her, too, although there was none here to be had. If she dismounted to drink from the stream, she'd be walking back to Bromley Manor. There was no way she could remount the horse, who wore a sidesaddle. Had she been riding astride she might've climbed up on a rock and thrown her leg over the animal. But the sidesaddle thwarted such an attempt. Best move on quickly so she could enjoy some water at the Harris farm. Or

she could head instead for the village of Brompton and take a cool drink from Mrs. Jameson at The Green Tree Inn. A better choice altogether. She turned Gretchen's head toward the village.

A quarter hour's canter brought them to the inn, a hub of industry just as Mrs. Pierce's shop in Potterne had been at her home in Wiltshire. Moments later, Mrs. Jameson's thirteen-year-old son had helped her off the horse and was leading Gretchen to the watering trough at the side of the inn. "Thank you, Tom. I won't be long." Only long enough to secure a cup of something cool and one of Mrs. Jameson's superior small cakes.

The innkeeper's wife did not disappoint, and Dora was soon ensconced in the place of honor nearest the large front window, a mug of small ale and two of the heavenly cakes on a plate in front of her. "Much obliged, Mrs. Jameson." Dora drank thirstily then bit into the first cake. The currants gave it an extra sweetness that made her want to eat it slowly to savor the taste, while simultaneously wanting to gobble down the sugary treat. "I am never disappointed when I come here."

"Ye're lucky today, lass." The good woman plied the surrounding tables with a soapy rag. "Those're me last two until tomorrow. A group of soldiers come through an hour or so ago like a plague of locusts and ate every scrap I had." She nodded to Dora's plate where the final cake remained. "Savin' the two I held back." She sent Dora a smile. "I knows you likes to come by of a Tuesday, Miss Harper, and that you like my cakes particular."

"Indeed I do, Mrs. Jameson." Dora broke off a bite of the remaining cake and popped it into her mouth. If that was the case, and there were no more to be had, she intended to savor this one. "What were soldiers doing here?"

“They asked me if I’d seen any ragged-looking men come by in the last day or two. Said they were looking for a man who’d escaped them several days ago. Takin’ him to Edinburgh, they were, when he gave ’em the slip.” Mrs. Jameson nodded and grinned. “Good fer ’im, I say. The army can be a cruel and vicious thing, mark my words, Miss Harper. Some men’r honorable and do their duty, but others are just mean through and through.” She nodded toward the door. “You don’t want no trouble with this lot, miss.”

“I certainly don’t, Mrs. Jameson.” She’d never had any communication with soldiers or the army in general. She’d always thought it a decent profession for a gentleman to enter, but she understood that all the regiments were not made up solely of gentlemen. Still, if they were searching for a prisoner, she’d pray they found him and swiftly. Such desperate men could be dangerous, especially to a woman virtually alone as she was.

Her father’s punishment when she broke her engagement to her long-time suitor Lord Trevor had resulted in her exile here in Yorkshire. That punishment extended to the number of servants retained on the Bromley estate as well: Hanson the butler, Mrs. McComber the cook, Alfred, who did double duty as groom and coachman, one young girl, Annie, serving as the only housemaid, Larkin, her lady’s maid, Mrs. Carlyle the housekeeper, and a single footman, James. The gardening was done by an elderly man who came from the village two or three times a week to make sure nothing was terribly overgrown. A pitiful contingency should someone threaten her safety, but the men were all fit save the gardener. Dora herself had learned to shoot since she’d come to Yorkshire—thanks to James—so together she and her household could fend off most threats to her safety.

“I will be sure to alert my household staff of both the soldiers and the

fugitive.” She rose. “But I must go. I’m determined to arrive at Mr. Hawkins’s cottage before luncheon so I may be home in time for my own.”

“That’s smart of you, miss.” Mrs. Jameson swept the crumbs into her hand then whisked away the cup and plate. “I’ll be looking for ya next Tuesday, just like always.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jameson.” Dora pulled on her gloves. Not only did she have to worry about getting home before dark, now she had to fret over soldiers coming upon her as well.

She mounted Gretchen, and with a call of thanks to Tom, trotted out of the innyard and down the village’s one lane until it disappeared into grass and Dora struck out for her father’s tenant farm, perhaps three miles away. The man’s wife had just given birth to a strong, healthy baby boy, and Dora had ridden out today with supplies for the young family stashed in a carry bag behind her saddle.

The warmth of the sun returned, although it didn’t plague her as much as thoughts of the soldiers and their quarry did. Dora had only been in the county since April. In that time, she hadn’t heard from, or even seen, the British soldiers garrisoned in York, the nearest town large enough to have troops stationed in it. They were at least two days’ ride from this part of Yorkshire, so she doubted the man they sought had headed this way. If he had a brain in his head, he’d head west toward Leeds, the biggest city in this part of England, and lose himself in the crowds.

The remainder of the ride was uneventful until she emerged from the trees on the hill to the north of Mr. Hawkins’s holding. This vantage point gave her a view of the tenant farmhouse, outbuildings, and barn. It also allowed her to see the five British soldiers, their red coats bright in the hot

sunshine, sitting their horses in the farm's front yard, speaking to her father's tenant.

Quietly, she backed Gretchen into the trees once more, unsure if an overabundance of caution made her unwilling for the soldiers to see her or simply that she was disinclined to have her plans for the day altered by the time it would take for their questions. Should she ride down to the farmhouse, she would likely need to explain her presence and that would delay her return. She'd wait here for the soldiers to depart then quickly deliver her gifts for Mrs. Hawkins and her baby and head home.

Dora didn't have long to wait. A thunder of hooves to the east told her the men had gone. Cautiously, she crept over the hill, but the yard was empty save for the dusty hoofprints they'd left behind. She gave Gretchen's flank a tap, and the horse trotted forward, down the hill to the low-lying house. No one was stirring now.

"Mr. Hawkins!" Dora called, and a dark curtain twitched in one of the small windows.

With the scrape of a bar being lifted, the plank door opened. Mr. Hawkins stuck his head out and glanced around the yard. "Miss Harper? Did you see the soldiers?"

Dora nodded. "From the rise near the trees. I waited until they left so they would not see a woman alone."

"'Twould've been better if you'd ridden with your groom this morning." Hawkins slipped out of the house to stand beside her, his whole demeanor still watchful. "The soldiers are chasing after a man from the north. I'd not have you run afoul of either of them."

"I'm sure I will not." Determined to show a brave face to the man,

Dora unhooked her leg from around the top pommel and slid nimbly to the ground.

The farmer grabbed the horse's bridle, giving Dora the opportunity to untie the carry bag from behind the saddle.

"Congratulations, Mr. Hawkins. I've brought a few things for your wife and child. Mrs. Hawkins is doing well?"

"Right as rain, thank you, miss." His face clouded over. "We're doing well. Or at least we were until those soldiers showed up this morning."

"I'm certain they will give you no trouble as long as you are not sheltering the man they seek." Dora hefted the bag and strode to the door. "If you'll stay with Gretchen, I'll leave these things with your wife and be back out in a moment."

The tenant nodded, though his gaze continued to scurry all around the farmyard.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hawkins." Dora smiled at the robust woman sitting in a rocking chair, the new baby held to her breast. Two other children, a girl just walking, and a boy, a sturdy toddler, were playing at their mother's feet. "What a lovely family you have. Congratulations on this newest little one."

"Thank you, miss." The woman's glance darted to the door behind Dora then she beamed down at the baby rooting lustily at her nipple. "We've called him Harry, after me da. He's a grand wee one, so he is."

"You must be very proud." Dora set the carry bag on the scrubbed table. "I've brought a few things you and the baby might find helpful." She pulled out a soft blue blanket she'd discovered in the attic at Bromley and had freshened then a pink and white shawl she'd brought with her from home but

had no real need of. Finally, she withdrew a wrapped haunch of venison, a large wedge of cheese, and two loaves of bread Mrs. McComber had baked early this morning. “And these are to help you regain your strength.”

“Aye, thank you, Miss Harper.” The woman’s eyes had widened as she stared at the bounty. “You’re that good to us, miss. Charlie said we’d gotten a piece of luck indeed the day you arrived at Bromley.”

“A piece of luck for both of us, Mrs. Hawkins.” The words had come automatically, although Dora doubted their veracity. Her gaze rested briefly on each of the children and finally on their happy mother. The woman was scarcely older than Dora’s eighteen years, yet she had a thriving family. Something Dora could no longer aspire to.

After breaking her betrothal to Tristan, Lord Trevor, she had no hope of another marriage. Deemed ruined by her father, she’d been banished to Yorkshire to get her out of sight and out of the minds of the rest of Society. If she could not get herself recalled home sometime during the coming winter, her prospects of anything other than the life of a spinster—and likely a pariah—were slim to non-existent. There was no society here where she could hope to meet an eligible gentleman, and even if there were entertainments in York or Leeds, she’d have no escort to such gatherings. Her father’s exile was punishment indeed.

Seeing the woman content with her children around her, Dora couldn’t help but think if she’d not released Tris from his promise, she might even now be married and expecting their first child. But then Tris could not have married Violet, his true love and her own dear friend. Although she suffered a tinge of regret every time she thought of it, she was certain she’d done the correct thing. After seeing the way Tris looked at Violet—with

unyielding love and deep desire—she'd wanted that same regard for herself and was wise enough to understand she would never have it from Tristan even if they were married a hundred years. She'd let him go with only the one regret: a family of her own.

Smiling at the tableau of mother and children, Dora picked up the empty carry bag. "I must go now, Mrs. Hawkins, if I am to be home by luncheon. If you need anything before I return, please send to Bromley. We want our tenants to do well here."

"Thank you, Miss Harper." The woman held her child closer and smiled at Dora gratefully. "You are an angel sent from the heavens. God keep you safe."

"You're more than welcome. Goodbye." Dora shut the door, her smile dimming as she turned to Mr. Hawkins, rubbing Gretchen's nose as he patiently waited. "Thank you, Mr. Hawkins. You have a fine family, and a beautiful new baby boy."

"Thank you, miss." He handed her the reins then cupped his hands to give her a boost into the saddle. "He's a brave lad, he is. Growing like a weed in just a week. He'll have a hand in the plowing before you know it."

"I'll check in on you next week as well, Mr. Hawkins. I told your wife, if you have any need, please send word to Bromley." Dora settled herself in the saddle and gathered the reins in preparation to leave. By the shadows around the house, she'd be only a little late for lunch if she hurried a bit.

"Miss Harper, have a care on your way back." Standing in the yard, with the grass all around him, Mr. Hawkins looked small for the first time. "Avoid those the soldiers if you can. The enlisted men seemed a decent sort,

but the officer in charge, well, he had a wild way about him.” Mr. Hawkins stared at her earnestly. “When I told him I’d seen nothing of this man they’re searching for, he bellowed I’d better be telling him the truth. If not, I’d be regretting it. Then he sent one of his men into the house to look for their fugitive. Gave my wife a start, but she’s a steady woman.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” Mr. Hawkins needn’t worry on that account. Between his disturbing tale and Mrs. Jameson’s admonitions, she’d become more than wary of the situation. A swift canter back to Bromley was her dearest wish now. “Good day.”

“Good day, mistress.” He waved, and Dora tapped her heel to Gretchen’s flank.

They started into a trot that immediately turned into a canter. The sooner they could get safely home, the better.

Rather than return the way she had come, Dora struck out across a fallow field, Gretchen’s hooves thundering on the bare dirt. Their rhythm increased Dora’s urgency to get home before some unknown calamity befell them. She risked a glance back over her shoulder, certain she’d see the troop of men hard on her heels, but the field remained empty save for the dust that flew up in her wake.

When they reached the grassy verge at the edge of the field that marked the farthest point of Mr. Hawkins’s tenancy, Dora pulled Gretchen down to a jog then to a walk. She was as winded as the animal she rode. Unaware she’d been panting the whole time since leaving the farmhouse, Dora gulped in huge lungfuls of air. “Good girl, Gretchen.” She leaned down to pat the horse’s sweaty neck. “I think it’s best if we head for that stand of trees just ahead and let us both catch our breaths in the shade.”

The short walk calmed Dora a measure. She'd no business allowing Mr. Hawkins to alarm her so badly. Should she happen upon the soldiers riding about searching for the prisoner, they would likely do nothing more than question her to see if she'd seen the man and since she hadn't, they'd allow her to continue on her way. Surely the officer of whom Mr. Hawkins had spoken was a reasonable man. He was an officer, after all.

Still, a trickle of dread made its way down her spine. A young woman was never supposed to ride without escort of some sort—at the very least a groom, although what Alfred alone could do against a group of five men didn't bear thinking about.

She hadn't considered it in the months since she'd come to Yorkshire. The countryside had been calm, even boring, all summer long. With so few servants to attend to the tasks of the estate, she'd begun riding out in the mornings alone either for the sheer pleasure of the ride or, as with today's outing, to care for her father's tenants or the people in the village. Seldom had she seen another soul, save the ones she visited or occasionally a man and his sons working in the fields. It had seemed perfectly safe for her to go about by herself.

Now she had never felt so alone.

Steering Gretchen under the trees, Dora guided her mount toward a small creek, where the air was appreciably cooler. Gazing about again, Dora breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing and no one was stirring. The trees provided some cover, and Gretchen could follow the stream for the next two miles for it would lead straight to the lane that fronted the manor house.

Though she hated to admit it, from now on she must take Alfred with her when she rode. Today's scare had taught her that much.

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than Gretchen neighed and shied away from the creek bed.

“Whoa, girl.” Dora controlled the frightened horse with sure hands on the reins. “What was it? A snake?” She glanced down but could see nothing alarming save a splash of red flowers against the near bank. “Are you afraid of roses now, my dear?” Grinning, Dora looked closer. They weren’t flowers though. What she’d taken for red blooms was, on closer inspection, some kind of fabric. She peered at it and cocked her head. What on earth was it?

Gretchen danced toward it, and the fabric moved.

Dora gasped as the brown grass beside the “roses” stirred then reared up, becoming the head of a man, his face streaked with mud and blood. He blinked then stared into her eyes. “Please, lass, can you help me?”

Chapter 2

With a gasp, Dora hauled back on the reins so hard Gretchen reared, her hooves dancing in the air before the man's face.

"Whoa. Easy." He put his hand up to ward off the horse, but otherwise looked unafraid. He rose to his knees then tried to stand. As he did so, he staggered to the right, gave a strangled cry, and toppled back down the embankment.

When he did not reappear, Dora urged the skittish horse forward. She leaned over Gretchen's shoulder, peering at the stream.

The stranger lay prone, his face in the gently flowing water, not moving.

"Dear God." Without a second thought, Dora unhooked her knee from the sidesaddle's pommel and slid to the ground. Keeping hold of the reins, she ran to the edge of the embankment, but the man still had not moved. Lord, had he drowned that quickly? Reluctantly, she dropped the reins—hopefully Gretchen wouldn't stray far—then looked for a place to climb down that wasn't too steep. It would do neither of them any good if she broke her leg in the tangled weeds while coming to his rescue.

She glanced toward him again. "Sir? Are you all right?"

No answer.

"Bloody hell." It had been her brother's favorite oath, or at least the one she'd heard most often from him, and she now relished saying it whenever she could. But only when she was alone.

Picking a likely place, she slithered down the overgrown bank and ran to the man, slipping precariously on the stones that lined the streambed.

Splashing toward him, she prayed she wasn't too late. His face was right in the water, but turned to the side, so at least his nose allowed him to breathe. She slid to a stop next to him, grasped his shoulder, and heaved.

The man was as heavy as the big rocks that lay around him, and her first grip slid free. Frantic, she put both hands under his shoulder and grunted as she tried again. This time her force was so great that he flipped neatly over, his head hitting the mud at the bottom of the stream. Her balance now off, Dora tilted backward, lost her footing completely, and sat down hard in the swiftly flowing water.

Exasperated, she regarded the still figure, clad in a dirty linen shirt, bright red kilt, and black boots. The kilt declared him Scottish without a doubt, and common sense said he was also the escaped prisoner. She was in a peck of trouble, no matter what she did, but she jolly well couldn't let the man drown in her stream. Not when she could easily pull him out. Even if he'd already been nothing but a nuisance.

Cold water had seeped through all the layers of her riding habit, making her shiver. With some effort, she got to her feet, mentally cursing the unconscious man, oblivious to her wet misery. Not only was her backside frigid and damp, but her favorite riding habit was undoubtedly ruined as well.

She hauled herself over to the stranger, peering at him to make sure he was still breathing, before grabbing his shoulders again and dragging him out of the water. A surprisingly handsome man, although she supposed a thief or whatever he'd been arrested for could be as handsome as a gentleman in a ballroom.

His dripping wet hair was likely a dark auburn when dry, a bit long and shaggy. The heavily stubbled jaw told her he'd been on the run for some

days. A clever criminal, it seemed. And a fit one. Indeed, as she was clasping his shoulders she could attest to their sinewy strength. His legs, on display beneath his kilt, were also well-muscled, from running or riding she couldn't tell.

The most perplexing thing, however, was his apparent youth. Despite the dirt and grime, he looked no more than twenty, little older than herself. What could he have done to cause his arrest?

Stopping at the top of the bank, Dora laid him down so his head was pillowed on a thick patch of weeds and inspected him more thoroughly. He'd been through some travail, that was certain. His left eye sported a rainbow of shades, and there were several deep scratches on his cheeks, a sure sign he'd been in some kind of altercation. A serious looking gash on his forehead might account for his fainting. At least he was still breathing, so he hadn't inhaled any of the water. She'd best try to wake him. The afternoon shadows were lengthening alarmingly.

She gently poked his hip with the toe of her boot.

Nothing.

A sigh escaped her. If she could find a way to get back on her horse and leave while the man was insensible, she should surely do so. But it simply wasn't within her power to abandon anyone who needed her help.

She darted glances around the field, suddenly afraid the soldiers would appear and find both her and their fugitive. But the landscape was silent save for birdsong and the rustle of the breeze in the trees. Giving herself a shake, Dora peeled off her clammy leather riding gloves, grasped her soaking handkerchief, and pressed it to the man's face. It seemed to have no effect on him, but she could feel the prickly stubble of his beard through the scrap of

linen.

Chills shot up her hand, the hairs on her arm standing on edge. Who would have thought that brush of whiskers against the pad of her thumb would be as...erotic as any kiss she'd ever experienced? Not that she'd had many, mind you, only one or two from Tristan. And while they had been quite pleasurable, the feeling that this man's rough skin evoked in her was quite wild in comparison.

She jerked her hand away. There must be something she could do to rouse him. Putting her altruistic instincts aside, she would require the stranger's help if she wanted to remount Gretchen and save herself a long walk home on a day she needed to travel swiftly. As she thrust the sodden handkerchief into the pocket of her habit, her hand brushed something hard and cold.

Her smelling salts. She grasped the vial, blue glass covered in silver filigree, took a breath, then popped the top and thrust the bottle under the man's nose.

With a gasp, he sat up and grabbed her wrist, pushing the vial away from his face. "Are ye trying tae kill me with that stink?" He gazed around, shook his head. "Who are ye? Where did ye come from?"

Startled beyond belief, Dora opened her mouth but was unable to form a single word.

His eyes, as sky blue as her riding habit, narrowed. "Cat got yer tongue, lass?"

"N...no." She managed to get that out. "You startled me, is all."

"Aye, well I'm sorry for that. Ye're a bit o' a surprise tae me too."

He released her wrist, and she staggered back to put some space

between them.

She replaced the stopper on the vial—it took her three tries she was shaking so badly from his abrupt awakening—and slid it back into her pocket, then stood gawking at him. Trying to make sense of the fact there was an escaped prisoner not three feet from her.

He frowned, his gaze narrowing. “I ken ye understand who I am, dae ye no’?”

Heart in her throat, Dora managed a short nod.

“Ye seem tae be a compassionate person, so I’ll dare tae ask ye tae help me, lass.” The menacing look had disappeared, replaced by anguish. “I canna let them take me again. They mean tae dae me grave harm before they take me tae the authorities. *If* they take me.”

“What did you do?” Dora backed up another step. Was he dangerous? It made a big difference if the man was a murderer or merely a thief. She glanced toward her horse. How quickly could she reach Gretchen, who stood quietly cropping grass nearby? Though how she planned to get up on the horse, should she reach her first, she had no idea. Perhaps she should simply make a run for it. If his leg was truly injured, she should be able to outdistance him quickly.

“No’ what they accuse me o’. I did a foolish thing, no’ a treasonable one. But the lieutenant disna see it that way and wants tae make me pay for something I dinna dae.”

It sounded reasonable, but wouldn’t all prisoners say such things? This was the thanks she got for trying to do a good deed. Dora sighed. She needed to find out how serious a threat this man was to her. “What *did* you do?”

“I wore this *glaiokit* kilt is what I did.” His anger seemed pointed at himself, not her. “And in their thirst for my blood, they dinna care that I hold a title, or that my father fought for the bloody British.”

“They arrested you for wearing a piece of clothing?” Surely he was having her on. “I hardly think—”

“Lass, I dinna think it wise tae bandy words here when Lieutenant Scarlet and his men could ride up on us at any moment. If ye’ve no’ met the lieutenant, I suggest ye no’ dae it alone in a field with an escaped prisoner at yer side. I guarantee the man will no’ be pleased with ye, and ye’ll feel his displeasure keenly.” He touched the cut on his forehead. “Ye can trust me in that if nothing else.”

Suddenly more afraid of the soldiers than the prisoner, Dora scanned the fields for any movement. Thank God all was still. Returning her gaze to the man before her, she took in his appearance once more. On closer inspection, his shirt, though torn, was of excellent quality, as was the fabric of his bright kilt. And his boots, though muddy, were expensive. He’d claimed to have a title. Was he indeed a gentleman? Could she trust him? Overwhelmed with the decision she needed to make, Dora simply stared at the man before her, not knowing what to do.

A look of resignation came over his face. “I canna blame ye, lass, if ye dinna wish tae trust me.” He pointed to Gretchen. “If ye’ll call yer wee beastie, I’ll give ye a leg up. I dinna wish yer blood on my hands should Scarlet and his men find us here.”

The earnest concern in his face said he told the truth—he’d allow her to leave him here to the mercies of the soldiers. And she’d have his blood on her hands if she did. How exasperating. “Are you too hurt to sit a horse?”

"I'm no' hurt sae bad I canna ride," he said cautiously.

There seemed no other way around it. He must go with her. Dora sighed, hoping she was doing the right thing. "Come on, then."

His shoulders slumped in relief that was short-lived as he cast a doubtful look at Gretchen. "Will the wee beastie bear us both?"

"She will if I ask her to." Dora paused, head up, gazing over the field one more time. "Wait." If the soldiers appeared now, they'd be in a pinch for sure.

The man had ducked back down, flattened himself along the embankment. Almost melted into the weeds and grasses, scarcely visible save his bright kilt. "Are they coming?"

"No," Dora tugged on her gloves, "but they've been seen in the village and out at one of the tenant cottages. We need to get you to my father's estate, as quickly as possible." She peered down at him, and her stomach flipped alarmingly. His piercing eyes seemed to bore right through her. She shook the strange feeling off. All that mattered now was escaping undetected. She offered him her hand. "Do you need my help?"

He ignored it and struggled to his feet, wincing as he put weight on his left leg. "I'll mount first then pull ye up behind me."

Not the answer she'd been expecting. Dora narrowed her eyes. If she relinquished the reins to this man, he could take Gretchen and strand her here to walk all the way back home. She couldn't chance it. "I'm riding sidesaddle, so I need to mount first. I won't be able to mount without your assistance. Besides," she looked pointedly at him, "I hardly think you want to wrap your leg around the pommel."

Looking her up and down, he grinned wickedly, bringing out dimples

in each of his cheeks. “A kilt is most accommodating for such things, lass.” He took a step forward and winced.

“Is it your leg that’s hurt?” Dora peered frankly at the man’s legs, quite on display from the knees down. Muddy, but well-shaped. “Or is it your knee?”

“Ankle. I landed wrong when my horse threw me.” He eased onto the leg gingerly. “I can put some weight on it, sae I dinna think it broken. However, if I tread full on it, the pain is excruciating.” He tried to ease up beside Gretchen, but the horse shied away. “Ye’d best claim yer beastie. I canna catch her in my present condition.”

Giving him a long-suffering look, Dora clucked to Gretchen and the well-trained horse trotted up to her.

“Impressive.” The man’s eyes held new respect for her.

“Which ankle is injured?”

“The left.”

She looked at him dubiously. “Are you able to mount?”

“I’ll manage, lassie.” He smiled broadly. “If ye’ll bring yer beastie t’Muhammad, please?”

Not sure if she was amused or annoyed by the stranger’s jovial tone, Dora nevertheless brought Gretchen to him. “Can I help you in some way?”

“Just hold the lass still.” He grasped the pommel and leaped into the saddle, his kilt flying out in a red arc before he landed with a grunt. His eyes widened then he winced.

“Are you all right?” He certainly looked uncomfortable.

“Fine.” The word came out curt as he cleared his throat.

The way he shifted in the saddle, he seemed anything but. “Did you

hurt your ankle?”

“Nae.” He grinned and gingerly pulled his right leg around until it rested against the pommel. Breathing heavily for a moment, he finally blew out a breath and reached a hand toward her. “Give me the reins, and I’ll help ye up behind me.”

Staring at the hand, Dora hesitated. The moment she surrendered them to him, he could ride away on Gretchen, leaving her to walk the long two miles home, easy prey for animals, both four- and two-legged.

Her suspicions must have shown in her face, for the man withdrew his hand and looked at her sternly. “Though I dinna look it at the moment, I am a gentleman. I give ye my oath I’d no’ strand ye in the middle of nowhere on a hot afternoon with the soldiers lurking about.”

“How do I know you’re a gentleman?” Although she suspected he spoke the truth, all she really knew was he was Scottish and an escaped prisoner. But she couldn’t risk the walk home. Her fear of this Lieutenant Scarlet had grown with each report she’d received today until the mere thought of being caught alone by him made her shiver. Better the devil you knew, if only slightly.

“How dae ye know I’m no’?” His eyes held more than a touch of impatience. “Fine.” He extended his hand to her once more. “Ye can hold the reins while I pull ye up.”

This could be the mistake of her life, but they needed to be gone before the soldiers appeared. She’d trust to God her attempt at a good deed wouldn’t incur a punishment and worry about the consequences later. Trying not to show him her trepidation, Dora grasped the reins in her left hand and took his with her right.

He clasped her hand in an iron grip. “When I say go, ye need tae jump.” A glance at her skirts brought a frown to his face. “Willna yer habit be in the way?”

Of course it would, but she couldn’t very well take it off. “This obviously isn’t going to work.” Now what was she going to do?

His gaze hardened, and he sighed. “Like it or no’, ye’re going tae have t’ trust me, lass.”

That was the last thing she wanted to do, but she’d committed herself to this path when she’d allowed him to mount the horse. So beggars could scarcely be choosers. “What do you propose?”

“Tie the reins tae the pommel.”

Against her better judgment, Dora did as he asked.

“Noo, lean over and pull the back o’ yer skirts through yer legs and tuck them intae the waistband.”

Horried at his suggestion, Dora put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “I will do no such thing. You’d have me wearing—” Breeches. She couldn’t even say the word to his face. She’d die of embarrassment if he saw even the shape of her legs.

“Lassie, there’s simply nae other way tae get ye up on this horse. Nae rock nor tree stump I can spy for ye t’ mount from. If ye do as I say, ye’ll fashion a garment that will allow ye tae ride astride.” He scanned the landscape. “We are pressing our luck with each passing minute.”

In that, he spoke truth. The short shadows of early afternoon showed plainly on the ground before the trees. They needed to be on their way. But his suggestion was scandalous. With her skirts bunched up that way, he’d surely see not just their form but her legs themselves.

“If ’twill persuade ye, *my lady*, I promise tae keep my eyes forward at all times once ye’re up behind me.” He grinned, wickedness in his eyes. “Word o’ a gentleman.”

“We still haven’t determined that you *are* a gentleman. And I’m not ‘my lady.’ I’m just Miss Harper.”

“Then Just Miss Harper, I vow tae keep yer modesty intact—as long as ye get on the horse.”

Regretting now not riding off and leaving the stranger in the creek, Dora bent over, grasped the back of her petticoat skirt and tugged it through her wide-spread legs. As expected, the fabric rode up her legs, revealing the calf above her half-boots all the way to her knee. However, now she was able to move more freely than she ever had before. Quickly, she tucked the fabric into the skirt’s waistband, although whether it would stay there without pins, she had no idea.

“Good.” The strange man had pointedly averted his eyes. “Noo, put yer foot in the stirrup and hop up behind me.”

“I can’t. It’s too high.” That was the reason she’d not been able to remount by herself.

“I’ll slip my foot out and ye can lower the stirrup.”

Pursing her lips, Dora stared up at him, annoyed beyond belief. “Don’t you think if I knew how to do that, I’d have remounted my horse long ago and been home by now?”

With a growl, he seized her arm and lifted her straight up. The stranger’s strength was astonishing. Despite her surprise, Dora managed to stab her foot into the stirrup, pushed up and threw her leg over Gretchen’s broad back. She landed with a hard thump that rattled her teeth, but she was

mounted at last.

He turned his head and said over his shoulder, “Are ye seated securely?”

“I seem to be.” Even though it felt intensely odd to have her legs on either side of Gretchen, she had to admit she was much more evenly balanced than she’d ever been riding in a sidesaddle and much less likely to fall.

“Noo, take yer foot from the stirrup sae I can guide the horse.”

An even odder sensation overcame her as he pushed her foot from the stirrup, and she had no purchase at all. “I’m going to fall!”

“Put yer arms around my waist.”

“I beg your pardon?” Dora shrank from the figure sitting mere inches from her. “I don’t know you well enough to do any such thing.”

He shrugged as he loosed the reins and gathered them into his hands. “Suit yerself, but I fear when the horse begins tae move, ye’re going tae topple off her back if ye’re no’ holding ontae something.” With a cluck of his tongue, he started Gretchen at a walk alongside the river. “And from yer position, I’m the only thing available.”

She could hear the smile in his voice and glared at the back of his head. “I’ll be fine.” At least she hoped so.

“Which way?” He turned his head, scanning the area again.

“Follow the creek for about two miles. It will lead to a road that fronts the manor house.” Used to holding the reins, Dora wanted to put her hands somewhere, anywhere save around the man’s waist, and finally opted for resting them on her thighs. “I don’t think—”

“Hang on.” The man made a small movement with his knee, and Gretchen broke into a canter.

With a gasp, Dora threw her arms around the stranger and met hard muscle and lean flesh. The warmth his touch generated in her was astounding. As though the man contained a smoldering fire within him, first her arms then her torso, and finally a secret place deep within her caught the blaze he generated. She only hoped she wouldn't be incinerated by the heat by the time they reached home.

Chapter 3

As her fear of falling off the horse waned, Dora became more and more aware of the very male presence seated before her. No trace of softness, as far as she could tell—his body seemed made of all hard angles. A rather pungent aroma assailed her nose, not completely unpleasant for it mostly spoke of the reedy creek water. There was also an underlying hint of a masculine scent she wasn't familiar with at all, although she liked it nevertheless.

Dora sighed, her cheek resting on the still-soaked shoulder of the man's jacket. She might have behaved very foolishly taking him back to the house, but she couldn't have abandoned him to the soldiers. Not after all she'd heard of them. Not with the scrapes and bruises marring his face. And not after he'd been willing to let her go, despite all that.

Undoubtedly, the soldiers would come looking for him either this evening or in the morning at the latest. What she would tell them she had no idea. Would she simply turn the man over to them or continue to give him sanctuary? It would help to know what he'd actually done. She found it hard to believe they arrested him for wearing a kilt. Surely the British army didn't care how a man dressed.

Still, they had arrested him for *something*. From the look of him, scratched, cut, and bruised, he'd put up quite a fight. But what had he really done?

She straightened, loosening her grip on the man's waist. Not that she could actually get away from him at this juncture. She could, however, learn something about him. "I'm afraid I neglected to ask your name earlier, sir."

He didn't answer, and his silence irked her to no end. "Can I have your name please, sir?"

Still no answer.

Dora's patience began to fray. She poked his shoulder. "Didn't you hear me?"

Suddenly, the man's head lolled backward, almost butting her in the head. Dear God, had he fainted? Or was he dead? And on a cantering horse.

Energy shot through Dora's veins. She sat straighter, calculating what she needed to do to bring the animal to a halt before Gretchen discovered no one was minding the reins and took off across the field at a dead run.

Trying to stem the panic that clogged her throat, Dora made herself let go of her grip on the stranger completely, although she compensated by clutching him with her arms to keep him from falling. Afraid to move her head to either side to see the reins, she instead slid her hands down his arms until her fingers touched his, the ribbons still gripped in his fists.

Gently, so as not to startle Gretchen, she drew the leather straps from his fingers, and a measure of calm descended on her to be back in control again with the reins firmly in her hands. Pulling on them steadily, Dora slowed Gretchen to a trot then at last to a walk. Breathing easier, she returned her attention to the unconscious man. Unfortunately, she could do nothing for him until they reached Bromley. Hopefully, he'd only fainted.

Her friend and sister-in-law Judith Harper had sustained a blow to the head that had rendered her insensible for more than four months. Of course, Judith's wound had resulted in her immediate incapacitation. That was not the case here. However, Dora couldn't help but wonder if this stranger had lapsed into a stupor from which he wouldn't recover for days or even months. She

could only pray not, keep a steady hand on the reins, and get them home quickly.

The man now leaned full back against her, making it more difficult to manage the horse. She longed to gallop Gretchen all the way home but feared the stranger would fall from the horse if she went at more than a fast walk. That would only exacerbate his wounds and force her to abandon him and ride like the wind for help as she wouldn't be able to hoist him back up onto the horse. She increased the pressure of her arms to anchor him more firmly, praying he would stay put. Then she urged Gretchen into a swift walk.

After what seemed an age, the road to Bromley came into view. Dora's spirits rose. She sat straighter and urged the horse almost to a trot. They were less than a mile from her door, and Dora longed for the welcoming sight of her butler and groom. The servants would likely be shocked, but she believed they were loyal to her. They'd give this unexpected guest help in any way they could, no matter if it flouted the proprieties.

Wearily, she turned Gretchen in through the familiar brick pillars that stood at the beginning of the crushed-shell driveway, a stone lion rampant on either pedestal holding a ball representing the world in their outstretched paws. Four months ago, they had struck fear into her heart at the thought of her solitary life to come. Now they were a most welcome sight. Down the driveway...a few more yards... Safe.

"Hanson," she called, hoping he was within earshot. The stranger hadn't regained consciousness. He sagged against her still, increasingly heavy, but that uncomfortable position allowed her to feel his chest rise and fall, assuring her he wasn't dead. She hoped she could keep him that way. "Hanson!"

Her second, louder and more urgent, call brought not only her butler to the door, but Alfred, the coachman-groom, at a run from the stable. “Alfred, Hanson, thank God. Grab him before he falls to the ground.”

Both men bounded into action, hurrying toward Gretchen. Dora carefully guided the limp man’s body over the side of the horse and into their waiting arms then swiftly unhooked his leg from around the pommel, and he slid safely off the animal at last.

“Do you need help, Miss Harper?” Alfred shot her a quizzical look, his eyes widening as he took in her posture astride Gretchen. “What happened, miss?”

Hanson’s look was just as scandalized, although he was too well-bred to say anything.

“I shall be fine, Alfred.” At least, she believed she would be. Her legs had begun to tremble, however, from her unaccustomed position. “I found him in the creek at the edge of Hawkins’s field. Take him to Father’s rooms. Undress him and put him in one of Father’s nightshirts. He has wounds I’ll need to tend to.” The men nodded and started into the house, Alfred holding the man’s feet while the butler grasped his shoulders. “Have a care when you take off his boots,” she called. “He’s injured his left ankle.”

“Who is he, Miss Harper?” Hanson spoke for the first time.

Frowning, Dora told him the only thing she could. “I’m not quite sure, but I intend to find out.”

“I’ll send Larkin to you, miss,” Hanson called as they disappeared into the house.

Frowning, Dora scooted into the saddle and thrust her left foot into the stirrup. Immediately, she relaxed, heartened by the familiar feel of the seat

beneath her. Slowly, she lifted her right leg over the horse, putting her in the usual position to dismount by sliding down the horse's flank to the ground.

Her legs, however, refused to work properly. Her knees almost buckled when her boots hit the driveway, causing her to grab the stirrup and hang on. A new soreness in her thighs added to her discomfort.

"Miss Harper, are you all right?" Larkin, her lady's maid, ran up to her. "Mr. Hanson said you'd need—" The girl stopped, her mouth dropping open as she stared at Dora's split skirts. "Miss Harper, what happened?"

"It's a very long story, Larkin." Swiftly, Dora pulled her skirt out of her waistband, and it fell into its proper place. "One I don't have time to tell." Dora took a step and winced. That awkward position had left a bit of soreness.

A nicker from Gretchen brought Dora up short. What should she do about the horse? "Here." She tied the reins to one of the boxwoods that lined the driveway. "Tell Alfred to come tend to her as soon as he's done with the gentleman, Larkin, then run fetch me the medicine chest and some bandages and bring them to the viscount's rooms. As quick as you can, please."

"But I need to tend to you, miss." Larkin stared askance at her. "You're dripping wet."

"I'll make do. Now run tell Alfred about Gretchen, and I'll meet you upstairs."

Larkin scurried up the front staircase, and Dora paused for a minute as a feeling of calm and normalcy washed over her again. Suddenly, she was confident once more. Commander of her own household. Peeling off her riding gloves, she strode toward the kitchen. First things first.

Mrs. McComber, Bromley's ancient cook, stirred something in a kettle hung over the fire when Dora walked in. "Good afternoon, Miss

Harper.” The cook turned to her and stopped, taking in Dora’s disheveled appearance. After a slight pause, she continued. “Are you ready for your luncheon?”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. McComber.” Dora stopped and stared at the tray waiting on the table. Food for one person only. That would have to change. “Yes, ma’am, but I fear I will need a substantial lunch for two hungry people.”

“Oh, you have a visitor, miss?” The cook’s brows shot up. Everyone knew no one paid Dora calls.

“Of a sort.” Dora really didn’t want to explain everything at this moment. “And I will require it to be served upstairs in the viscount’s apartments.”

The elderly woman gave Dora a sharp look but nodded and went back to stirring her pot. “Yes, miss. I’ll send Larkin up with it directly.”

“Send James, please, Mrs. McComber. Larkin will be assisting me with several other tasks. And thank you.” Let the woman think what she would.

Dora stalked out and headed for the stairs. The clamminess of her riding habit had finally become unbearable. She couldn’t wait to be free of it and attired in clean, dry clothing once more. As the habit fastened in the front, she could remove it herself, although the wet garment would likely make the task difficult. Putting on clean clothes would require Larkin’s assistance, however.

With a sigh, Dora grasped the banister and began to haul herself upward. She’d never lamented her lack of servants here at Bromley as many times as she had today.

The wet garment did indeed cling to her arms as she tried to free herself from her bodice. Slowly, she peeled it from her, shivering slightly when the fabric fell away from her damp body and cool air wafted over her chemise. She dropped the sodden mess of velvet on the floor, untied the drawstring at her waist and let petticoat and skirt fall to her feet then stepped away, now attired in only chemise and stockings. They were still clammy, too wet to wear. In moments, she was naked and rummaging in her dressing closet when Larkin's voice called out, "Miss Harper? Where are you?"

"In here, Larkin." Unable to decide, Dora finally snatched up a plain red gown. She'd not had time to have clothes made when she was exiled to Yorkshire, so all her dresses were rather old, but what they lacked in style, they made up for in comfort. This red one was a favorite, fitting her body well. "I'll wear this." She popped her head out of the dressing room and held the garment up for Larkin to see. "Help me get into it quickly, please."

"That one, miss?" Larkin's nose wrinkled as she passed Dora then gathered the clothing into her arms.

"I want to be comfortable if I have to nurse this man. It's not as if I'm going to a ball or some grand entertainment." Dora signaled the maid to bring the gown and its underpinnings and strode back into the bedroom. "I need new stays, stockings, and a chemise. These are wet through."

"Everything was wet through, miss. Did you fall into a creek?" The maid followed, arms full.

"More or less." Dora raised her arms, and Larkin slipped a clean, dry chemise over her head. "I was trying to keep a man from drowning."

"Who is he, miss?" As they talked, Larkin had snugged the stays over Dora's chemise and begun lacing it up.

Dora grunted as the laces tightened. "I'm not quite sure." That much was true, at least. She didn't know his name, and anything else she did happen to know would be kept to herself for now. "Once he regains consciousness, I mean to find out."

"I don't think it's wise to be bringing a stranger here, miss. Not when there's a lady and other defenseless women to be thought of." The maid had finished her lacing and commenced pulling the stockings over Dora's legs. "Knocked out as he is, there's not much danger until he gets his strength back, but you never know with gentlemen, miss. Even the best sort can be a handful of trouble."

He'd been trouble enough already, but she needn't share that tidbit with Larkin either. "Did you fetch the medicine chest to my father's room?"

"Yes, miss. Bandages and warm water too. Now this, please." The maid coaxed the sleeves of the bodice onto Dora's outstretched arms.

"Good." Dora fretted to be gone as the maid finished tying her waist strings, impatient to be off to the sickroom. She wasn't sure at all why she felt such an urge to attend the man. He likely had not woken yet. Still, something in the back of her mind argued that if he woke up alone, he might bolt before she got the chance to tend him. Foolish to think he could move with his injured ankle, but the urgency to go to him would not be denied. "Are you done yet?"

"Just this moment, miss." Larkin stepped back, clutching a filmy white fichu. "Shall I put this on you as well?"

Shaking her head, Dora started for the door. She must get going. "No need. I'm fine without it."

"Your shoes, miss!" Larkin scurried forward to set a pair of black

mules in front of Dora.

“Thank you, Larkin.” Sighing, Dora stepped into the shoes then dashed out the door. What else would come along to delay her? Almost trotting down the corridor, Dora kept her hands on her skirts to keep them from being snagged. She couldn’t afford another delay. Perhaps the urgency that niggled at her lay in her fear for the man’s welfare. His wounds were too reminiscent of her Judith’s for comfort. He needed tending if he was to survive. Which he surely wouldn’t receive if she turned him over to the authorities. The harsh set of Mrs. Jameson’s face when she’d said the soldiers were cruel to their prisoners rose before her eyes. She’d not have his death on her conscience, no matter what.

That settled in her mind, Dora hurried down the corridor toward the viscount’s apartments, her heart suddenly in her throat. Her generosity toward the stranger could turn out very badly indeed, for both her and the people under her care, if she’d misjudged the man. Still, she recalled the concern in his eyes when he offered to let her go alone and her resolve stiffened. Deep down, she knew she’d made the right decision.

When she reached the door, she paused to catch her breath, steady her nerves, and marshal her strength. With determination, she grasped the latch, pushed it down, and the door swung open. Head held high, Dora entered.

Chapter 4

With a fluttery feeling that almost made him ill, Finn struggled toward consciousness. A stabbing ache in his head made him wince. The pain was reminiscent of his twenty-first birthday when his uncle had plied him with whisky until the wee hours of the morning. Hopefully, this ache wouldn't make him as violently ill as he'd been then.

Cautiously, Finn opened his eyes to slits—no need to give the inhabitants notice that he was awake. But a quick look told him the room was empty. Opening his eyes wider, he took in the massive mahogany bed with its dark burgundy and gold trappings, the grand fireplace where flames licked the logs, the casement window with drapes open allowing the bright afternoon sunshine into the chamber. All in all, a well-appointed room, if a little grandiose for his own tastes. Still, wherever he'd ended up, the owner had spared no expense with his creature comforts. So where the devil was he? And who was the woman who'd found him and brought him here?

He shifted in the bed, and a sickening pain shot up his leg from his ankle. "Jesus!"

Panting against the ache, he slowly shifted again and managed to sit up without further agony. Moving slowly, he peeled the covers off his legs, dreading what he might find. But his legs both looked normal, no broken bones in evidence, although his left ankle seemed swollen and a little bruised. Still, it could have been much worse.

His boots had been removed, of course, and he glanced at the floor, but they weren't in evidence. Neither were his clothes. Worse luck. Currently, he was clad in an old-fashioned chemise, good quality linen that had been

worn seldom, with lace at collar and cuffs. Gently, he ran his hand down his leg to his ankle, needing to confirm his initial impression. The swelling was slight, which meant a sprain. Unfortunately, he'd aggravated the initial injury by walking on it God knew how far. It would hurt like hell for a week or more, making further escape difficult, if not impossible, although, apparently, he could still sit a horse. He distinctly remembered leaping onto the blond woman's horse, but not much else. Such a limitation could end up being deadly for him.

Finn pulled the coverlet back over his legs, perusing the room once more. A very masculine room, unlikely to belong to the woman who'd rescued him. Her image appeared in his mind, the bright blond hair, porcelain pale skin, lovely red lips making him sigh and grin. A spirited woman as well as beautiful. Was she perhaps the mistress of the house? Its eldest daughter? He hoped the latter, although he couldn't entertain thoughts of anything but escape at this point if he wanted to live. The soldiers were scouring the countryside for him. He must focus on them and how to elude them at all costs.

The door latch clattered. Finn dove down in the bed, snapping his eyes shut and sucking in his breath at the pain the movement caused. Biting his lip, he opened his eyes to slits once more, determined to take the measure of the person, be they maid or mistress.

The tall golden-haired woman who'd rescued him stepped into the room, so soft-footed she might've been a cat. She pulled the door closed with a quiet click and turned to survey the room. She'd changed the sodden pale blue riding habit for a dark red gown that suited her better. This one made her skin fairly glow.

She went directly to the small chest resting on a chair at the foot of the bed, opened it, and rooted around in it. At last, she withdrew something and turned to a pitcher and ewer sitting on a nearby table. She poured water into the bowl and dropped something into it. A competent, no-nonsense woman, to be sure. She'd struck him as less so out by the burn, but the situation had been so out of the ordinary he didn't blame her for being a bit scatterbrained. All that mattered, then and now, was her willingness to help him.

Carrying the bowl of water, she approached the head of the bed, and Finn closed his eyes all the way, making himself relax in order to feign sleep. But at the touch of a warm, wet cloth to the cut on his forehead, he couldn't help flinching. The wound was new enough it still smarted a bit. Had his movement given him away? Perhaps not. Certainly, a man might wince in his sleep if something pained him. At any rate, he'd continue to pretend to sleep and hope to discover more about the lass.

She quickly replaced the cooling cloth with another heated one, and Finn had to repress a groan of pleasure. The heat soaking into his aching head felt good indeed. The woman's touch was light as she rubbed the cloth over his tender skin. She patted it with a dry cloth then daubed the wound with something that felt sticky and smelled of sweetness and lavender. Honey, most likely. His own mother had used that for his cuts when he was a lad.

Lost in that memory, Finn almost opened his eyes in surprise as the woman lifted his head from the pillow to wind a bandage around his forehead. She covered the wound neatly and tucked the tail of the cloth in at the front then laid him back on the pillow. Finn breathed a sigh of relief, to have her hands no longer on him. That innocent connection had begun to stoke a not-

so-innocent response below. Hopefully, now she'd leave him to rest and devise a plan to allow him to continue on his way.

To his surprise, however, the woman drew the cover off his body, and Finn's attention snapped back to her—and more importantly, to his groin, where his interest in the lass had become rather apparent. What the devil was the woman planning to do with his manly parts so exposed? Just the thought of her looking at him, even clothed in the long chemise, made the situation with his member dire. If she touched him again, he feared his desires would be more than evident.

Her firm hands seized his ankle, and it was all Finn could do to keep from crying out. The pain did take care of one problem as neatly as a dash of cold water would have. The woman continued to feel his swollen ankle with deft hands, causing a fierce pain to shoot up the affected leg. He shifted and bit back a moan. If she intended to treat the sprain, he might have to abandon his ruse. Finn wasn't one for complaining about a bit of discomfort, but he'd had sprains before and tending them hurt worse than if the foot had been broken.

Gritting his teeth, Finn steeled himself for the worst. But the woman surprised him again by rubbing some sort of salve lightly on the swollen, aching flesh. Thank God for the lass's light touch. No sooner was the prayer given than the woman lifted the leg and held it immobile under her arm. Finn burned to open his eyes and discover what the devil the woman was doing. A soft piece of cloth was passed around his ankle and a moment later, a garbled groan was forced from his lips as the cloth tightened unmercifully around his aching flesh. The woman continued to bind the ankle tightly, sending wave after excruciating wave of pain throughout Finn's leg. He bore it as best he

could until he lost the tenuous battle for consciousness and descended into darkness once more.

Coughing at the sharp stink that assailed his nose, Finn sat bolt upright in bed, instinctively shoving the vial of smelling salts away from him. He glared at the woman hovering right in front of him and snorted to get the foul reek out of his nostrils. "I'll thank ye never t' dae that again, woman."

"If you'd stop fainting on me, I'd be happy to oblige." She grinned at him, a wicked twinkle in her eyes, and recapped the vial. "Larkin just brought up a tray for you, and I thought hot food would be preferable to cold."

Finn eyed her, impressed by her fearlessness in standing up to a stranger. Her jaw, while pleasingly rounded, still had a granite set to it. And her eyes met his with a no-nonsense stare. He returned her grin. "In that, my lady, ye are correct."

"I'm not 'my lady.'" She set the tray on the bed, and the smell of a hearty broth replaced the noisome stench of the smelling salts handily.

"That smells good enough tae eat."

"You have me to thank for that." The woman handed him a napkin, and when he'd settled that under his chin, gave him a large spoon. "Cook was adamant you should be put on an invalid diet of water toast and tea."

Finn grimaced, although even that meagre fare sounded a feast to him.

"But I told her I believed you needed some good food and plenty of it." She laughed and edged the tray closer. "So instead, you have beef broth, bread, and cheese. I may have told her that her broth could bring a man back from the dead, just for good measure."

"I am forever in yer debt." He dipped the spoon in and took a cautious sip. It was hot and meaty and shot straight to his empty stomach, which growled in appreciation. The savory broth was the first food he'd had in three days. The last morsel to pass his lips had been a pie he'd filched from a farmhouse as it sat cooling on a windowsill. He'd enjoyed the gooseberries, although he'd wished it had been a meat pie instead. Still, he'd been truly grateful to the housewife who'd filled his belly for two days.

Finn groaned in pleasure and gulped down another spoonful of his present feast. And another.

"Wait! You'll make yourself sick if you take it so fast." The woman grabbed his hand and stilled the spoon.

Reluctantly, Finn allowed her to take it. She was right. If he ate too quickly, he'd simply embarrass himself by casting up his accounts in front of his savior. No way to repay a kindness. He met her gaze and smiled. "Ye may have spoken truth at that. That broth has brought me back tae life."

"I'll convey your thanks to Cook." She shoved a piece of the country bread into his hand. "Dip this into the broth before you eat it. You'll go slower that way, I think."

Finn gazed into her face and, finding genuine concern there—something he'd had precious little of from English faces recently—nodded. "Thank ye..." Och, she'd given him her name, but it escaped him. "Miss...?"

"Miss Harper. Dora Harper."

"Miss Harper." Finn made an awkward attempt at a bow. "I am truly in yer debt."

He dutifully dipped the slice of bread into the bowl and shoved the dripping end into his mouth. The flavor exploded on his tongue once more,

and he paused briefly to savor it before dunking the rest of the bread in to sop up as much broth as possible. When the bowl was empty, he lay back on the pillows, exhausted but sated for the first time since his nightmare had begun. “Ye’ve saved my life twice noo, Miss Harper. And although I dinna think I’ll be able tae repay yer kindness sufficiently in the present, rest assured I will dae sae as soon as possible.”

Miss Harper’s brows dipped down toward the bridge of her nose. “I wouldn’t dream of holding you to such an obligation.” She looked at him earnestly. “I couldn’t let a fellow human being die in a ditch or have him starve to death before my eyes.” Her smile was warm, gentle, with the right corner of her mouth lifting a little higher than the left. “I am truly glad you seem to be on the way to recovering, Mr....uh?”

Her question put Finn in a quandary. Dare he tell her his true name? There was peril for her either way, especially as the British soldiers would likely be calling on her shortly. If he embroiled her further in his troubles, he’d be risking her life even more. Still, she had taken him in, and he owed her honesty, at the very least. And deep down, for reasons he’d rather not admit, he wanted her to know who he actually was. “I am Phineas, a member o’ Clan Macdonald, and the Earl o’ Aberfoyle.” He bowed his head. “At yer service, Miss Harper.”

His hostess’s eyes widened then narrowed. “Lord Aberfoyle, is it?” She took up the tray and set it on a nearby table. “A rather distinctive title, is it not? One a young lady would surely remember had she heard it in Society. Yet I have been out for over a year and have not heard a word about you, my lord.”

Finn crossed his arms over his chest. “I have no’ had occasion tae

travel t' England in several years, Miss Harper. I have remained on my estate near Aberfoyle tending tae it and my other properties. I've had nae need for the frivolities o' London Society." He fixed her with a keen eye. "Noo, had ye traveled t' Edinburgh in search o' a husband then we surely would have met." He looked her up and down. "A woman o' yer beauty and intellect would no' have gone unnoticed by any red-blooded Scotsman within fifty miles." As he stared into her round blue eyes, Finn's stomach did a strange flip. "Especially not by me."

Her cheeks pinkened, like the sun had suddenly come out and kissed them. The thought of kissing her flashed though Finn's mind, and he had to hold his breath.

His gaze must've spoken volumes to her, for Miss Harper staggered back. "You're a Scottish laird, then?"

Finn gave a sharp shake of his head. "I'm the thirteenth Earl o' Aberfoyle, which is a title in the Peerage of Scotland, created in 1603 by the then newly crowned James I o' England. Sae I am Lord Aberfoyle, no' a laird o' a clan. They're different, ye may be assured."

"I see." With her mouth in a straight line, Miss Harper looked as though what she did see wasn't at all to her liking. "You are an earl by English decree, yet you eschew English society?"

"As I am no' one o' the sixteen Scottish representative peers o' the House o' Lords, I have nae good reason tae spend time in London, Miss Harper. The British having done my family little good in the past and absolutely none in the present."

Her brows puckered, making her face even more charming. "What do you mean?"

Finn sighed, weighing his options once more. Would explaining his family history make Miss Harper more sympathetic to him? She was English through and through, it seemed. Still, he'd chance it. "My father was killed in 1745, during the Jacobite Rebellion at the Battle o' Prestonpans."

"He was a Jacobite?" She had stilled, eyes wide as she glanced at the door.

"Nae. Well, no' really." Finn sighed. The family politics had always been complicated. "Being Scots, the Macdonalds o' Sleat were sympathetic tae the Jacobite cause, but my father and many o' the clan members chose tae join a Highland regiment that fought for the British army. That's why, when he died, I was able tae inherit his titles and properties. His loyalty tae the king was rewarded that much. All the Scots who fought against England lost everything. Sae I became the Earl o' Aberfoyle at the age o' eight." Finn looked at Miss Harper, whose very expressive face had softened. "My uncle was my guardian until I reached my majority four years ago and life has been quite pleasant, almost dull, until recently."

"When, according to you, you were arrested for wearing a kilt." Suspicion had reappeared in Miss Harper's eyes. "They certainly can't arrest you simply for wearing a piece of clothing."

He smiled ruefully. "Actually, Miss Harper, they can."

Chapter 5

“Ye may no’ be quite as familiar with the law o’ the land as I am, Miss Harper.” A young, sheltered woman such as herself likely had no knowledge of the hateful law he had broken. “But it’s true.”

“That’s as may be. I don’t pretend to know the law.” No, she might not know much about the law, but she did know he was a wanted man. He’d admitted it himself. But she could let her questioning go for now and hope he’d tell her the truth in the end. A glance at him showed his complexion had paled and his eyes were tired. That wouldn’t do at all. She picked up the tray. “I’ll take these down and let you rest until dinner.”

“Thank ye, lass.” He tracked her as she nodded briefly and sped out the room.

Something told him Miss Harper wasn’t going down to the kitchen simply for tea. The next person to open that door was as likely to be Lieutenant Scarlet as his hostess. Perhaps more likely. Finn doubted she’d believed him to be an earl. Certainly, he didn’t look like one in his current state. He really didn’t know what he could do to convince her, save tell her the rest of his story. Better to have her think him a fool than a murderer—or worse. He’d been incredibly stupid. Now he could only hope to live through this ordeal, with Miss Harper’s reluctant help, it seemed. There was nothing for it but to wait until she returned and try to explain the troubles that had befallen him in the past weeks. And hope she would believe him.

Finn worried himself into a restless sleep where dreams of Miss Harper’s charmingly crooked smile alternated with nightmarish scenes where red-coated soldiers clapped him in irons in a dark dungeon and threw the key

into the sea. He awoke from that one in a cold sweat, gazing frantically around the room at the plush furnishing to reassure himself it had indeed been a dream.

The chamber remained quiet, only the sounds of birds twittering outside the window breaking the solitude. The sole way he could tell the afternoon was passing was the lengthening shadows as the sun crawled across the window that overlooked a rear garden. He could see only a tiny bit of greenery from the bed, but the light had unmistakably softened. Perhaps he was safe for one more day.

The door swung open, and Miss Harper entered with a large tray filled with dishes. "I looked in with the tea tray some time ago, but you were fast asleep, and I didn't wish to disturb you. Did you rest well, my lord?"

"No' particularly, despite this comfortable bed." Sleeping in barns or under hedgerows for the past several nights had given him a healthy respect for creature comforts. "But after my recent adventures, I willna rest easy until I get tae London."

Her eyes met his. "So you are now traveling to London, even though you informed me earlier that you had no business there."

"No' previously, Miss Harper, but circumstances change. I'm certain ye're aware o' that general truth." Devil it, he hadn't meant to speak so sharply to her, but the suspicion in her eyes irked him immeasurably.

"I suppose I am, my lord." She set the tray on the table then handed him silverware and napkins. "I convinced Cook you needed fattening." She removed the covers from the plates, and the heavenly smells that wafted over him brought tears to his eyes and made his mouth water.

"Will ye dine with me, Miss Harper?" He hoped she'd say yes, despite

her misgivings. “I’ve had my fill o’ solitude this past week. I’d relish a bit o’ company, especially yers.”

“I thought you might wish for a companion, so I had Cook fix my dinner on the tray as well.” She smiled and handed him a plate.

His stomach growled. “My pardon, Miss Harper.” His own body conspired against him. What must she think of his manners?

“Think nothing of it, my lord.” She smiled and took up her own plate. “You’ve a bit of catching up to do, unless I miss my guess.” She nodded to him. “Please, begin.”

Finn needed no further invitation. The food was hot, plentiful, and delicious. He commenced with the juicy, rare roast beef, and silence held sway in the room for some minutes. Finally, when his first pangs of hunger were assuaged, he came up for air to find Miss Harper watching him as she drank her wine. He took up his glass also and drank deeply before remembering his manners just in time to keep from draining the glass.

“You look as though you’ve not eaten in a very long time, my lord.” Miss Harper held her wineglass in both hands, assessing him. “Would you care to tell me what actually happened to you?”

To give himself time, Finn dredged a piece of potato through the thick sauce and popped it into his mouth. What would be the best way to tell her about his wretched adventure? “Would ye like the long version or the brief?”

That seemed to take her aback. Her brows rose, and she cut her eyes toward him. She set her glass on the table and picked up the bottle of Bordeaux. “I am a great believer in brevity, my lord. More wine?”

He nodded, glad for the relaxing properties a good bottle of wine would afford him.

She filled his glass and hers, careful to keep her gaze on the wine.

Taking a sip to brace him, Finn began. “The crux o’ the matter is that I was stupid.”

“Indeed.” Her brows swooped up alarmingly, eyes wide, giving her the look of a startled deer.

“I suppose ’tis difficult tae believe, but ’tis nothing but the truth.” Finn settled back on the pillows, sated and more comfortable than he’d been in what seemed like forever. “My sister was tae be married in the kirk at Aberfoyle just about a week ago, I believe. Time has been muddled a bit in my mind. What day is it?”

“Tuesday, the tenth of August,” she said, her gaze following him keenly.

“Then exactly a week ago, on August third. My sister Mary had met a good man early in the new year and they’d asked my permission tae marry.” Finn shook his head. “I was all for having a small ceremony at home, but Mary insisted on marrying in the kirk. Sae the family was invited, and last week I took great pride and satisfaction in giving my sister away.”

Miss Harper’s keen gaze held him enthralled. “I doubt seriously you’d be accosted by the British Army for attending your sister’s wedding.”

“Aye, likely no’ if all I was doing was attending the wedding. But as head o’ the household, I was giving my sister away, in front o’ God, the priest, all our family.” He paused and grinned at her. “For such a ceremonious occasion, I wanted my father represented as well. So, I wore his kilt, made up in the tartan plaid o’ the Macdonalds o’ Sleat.”

Miss Harper stared at him then shrugged. “I’m certain you cut quite the dashing figure.”

Finn shook his head. He stared at the pretty Englishwoman. She was terribly young. He couldn't expect a well-brought up young Englishwoman to even know of the Dress Act or how it rankled the souls of every Scotsman.

"I dinna think ye noticed that when we met, Miss Harper." He chuckled when she blushed, her cheeks reddening to the hue of ripe cherries.

"I'm sure I didn't notice anything about your kilt, *my lord*." She settled back in her chair, but Finn caught her surreptitiously feeling her bright cheeks.

"Well, if ye dinna, the British Army did."

"Whyever would they be interested in your clothing?" She looked at him as though he were a lunatic.

"The Dress Act, which prohibits all Scottish men and boys from wearing kilts or plaids—tartan clothing, that is. Disobey the law, ye're clapped in prison for six months. Dae it a second time, and the punishment is transportation tae the colonies for seven years."

Miss Harper's lips were pressed together in a thin line. "That seems overly severe."

Finn stared into her beautiful, innocent eyes. "I see ye've no idea o' the depth o' hatred the British hold for Scotland and the Scots."

"But you said your father died fighting for England." A puzzled frown deepened the lines of her brow.

"And he wisna the only one. However, the British cared naught for such loyalty. The Dress Act stands tae this day. The only men allowed tae wear it are those who have sworn an oath o' loyalty and joined special Highland companies." He let his eyes twinkle at her. "I'm no' a member o' any o' those regiments." Finn gazed over Miss Harper's shoulder, out the

window, seeing something quite different from the patch of garden still touched by the afternoon light. “My father was, and he died for king and country. That should have been enough.”

“Yes, it should have been, Lord Aberfoyle.” The words were spoken without malice. Quite to the contrary, they had conviction, and in her face, he found a trace of guilt. “But how did the soldiers know you’d be wearing the illegal garment?”

“That, Miss Harper, is the very question. I’d told no one, no’ even my sister, I’d be wearing it sae I could surprise her.” He clutched the coverlet in both hands. “Cormack, Mary’s groom, had apparently been gaming with some soldiers from Edinburgh Castle no’ long before and mentioned he’d be getting married. For some reason, a lieutenant asked tae be invited and I suppose Cormack dinna want tae offend the officer, and sae issued an invitation tae the ceremony and the breakfast after.” Christ, why had Cormack done such a fool thing? “That would have been bad enough, but the daft gomerel dinna think tae tell me they’d be attending.”

“Dear Lord.” Miss Harper’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Needless tae say, I’d have worn something quite different had I known. However...” The officer had gotten a nasty shock to be sure. “I’ve never seen blood drain from a face sae quickly as it did from the lieutenant when he saw me coming down the aisle, my sister on my arm. O’ course, my face was likely as white when I caught sight of him.” He’d almost stopped in his tracks when he’d seen the bright red coats in the kirk. Still, he’d tried to carry on. His sister’s wedding couldn’t be marred by his own folly.

“What happened then?” Miss Harper had leaned toward him, hanging on his every word.

“He stopped the wedding by arresting me on the spot.” Finn shook his head. “I dinna ken tae this day whether Mary and Cormack are wed or no’.”

Not unexpectedly, Miss Harper’s eyes had widened until they seemed all blue. “I cannot understand why the lieutenant couldn’t make an exception for such an occasion. You weren’t parading about in the public square or anything.”

“Nae, nothing sae blatant, but the kirk is a public place and that was enough for Scarlet. Believe me, I tried tae persuade him, as did Cormack.” Finn’s mouth hardened. “He wisna inclined tae be lenient.”

“Not even when he knew you were Lord Aberfoyle?”

Finn shrugged. “I broke the law. My status disna keep me from being charged in criminal matters, although from what I’ve gathered no’ all soldiers take the charge as seriously as Lieutenant Scarlet.”

“Do you know why he did?”

“I dinna at first. After dragging me from the kirk, Scarlet tapped me with the butt o’ his pistol,” Finn pointed to the gash on his forehead, “and I kenned naught until later that night when I learned the reason for his great animosity tae me.” Finn picked up his cup. The tea was stone cold, but he drained it anyway. “His father had been killed at the Battle o’ Culloden, a little more than six months after mine. I tried tae make him see that those circumstances should call for leniency, since both men had been fighting for the same side.” Finn shook his head and set the cup down. “He just laughed and said I was still a Scot and if I was wearing a kilt, he could guess tae which side my family actually gave their allegiance. Sae I deserved nae consideration o’ any kind.”

“I’m so sorry, my lord.” Miss Harper took his hand, which startled

Finn to no end. Then she gave it a gentle squeeze. “He must have felt his father’s death keenly.”

“As did I, I assure ye, Miss Harper.” He withdrew his hand and stared at her, anger flooding his chest. Much as he hated to sound harsh, this Englishwoman couldn’t possibly understand how galling it was for Finn that his father had died fighting for a cause he didn’t believe in, against men with whom he actually sympathized.

The shocked look on Miss Harper’s face sent a sliver of guilt through Finn. She might be English, but she’d been kind to him when she might easily have left him in the burn, easy prey for Scarlet.

The woman quickly tucked her hand into her lap and cast her gaze down at the coverlet. Silence encompassed them, save for the ticking of the clock.

Finn fought for some other topic, but everything he could think of seemed either rude or banal.

Finally, Miss Harper managed to look at him. “Why didn’t you go with the soldiers and plead your case to the authorities? Surely they would have been lenient with you under the circumstances.”

Finn shook his head. The lass might have spirit, but she knew little about the way of the world. At least for the Scots. “The troop was stationed at Edinburgh Castle, only a day’s ride from Aberfoyle, where the garrison was to be commanded by a person o’ some status, which could mean a reward for turning in a traitor.”

“A traitor?” His hostess paled. “Surely they could not charge you with treason. You broke the... What act was it?”

“The Dress Act.” Finn couldn’t help smiling at her agitation. She was

terribly sweet to worry about him.

“The Dress Act, then.” She frowned, her mouth set in a straight line. “A law that has its own punishment when broken. The lieutenant cannot simply say you committed treason when you actually broke a different law.” Her brows furrowed deeper. “You said there was a penalty for disobeying the Dress Act. That’s what you should be charged with, not treason.”

“Och, I suppose ’tis a fine line between the two if ye look at it from Scarlet’s perspective.” Finn cocked his head. She did seem truly concerned for him. Was she married? Surreptitiously, he glanced at her left hand, but there was no ring. Even a widow would still wear her ring. If not married, then where were her parents? “The Scots who fought on the Jacobite side in the rising were considered guilty o’ treason. Scarlet was sae incensed at my actions he would have certainly tried tae make a case for charging me with treason.”

“How could he do that?” The woman looked more and more perplexed.

Finn studied her face, looking for some clue as to her identity. By her speech, her carriage, her manners, she seemed to be of aristocratic birth, although perhaps she was of the wealthier gentry. “The penalty for breaking the Dress Act is seldom enforced, and he wanted me punished tae the fullest extent o’ the law. Perhaps he kens the garrison commander will side with him. My wearing a kilt might have roused the commander’s anger as well.” Finn shrugged. “However, after a small taste o’ Scarlet’s personal attentions, I decided I wisna going tae give him the opportunity tae continue them.”

“What did he do?” Miss Harper clutched his hand, sending a spark dancing up his arm.

“He took me away from the kirk, unconscious and draped over a horse with my hands tied. I only came tae when we stopped tae water the horses, and Scarlet dragged me off the horse and threw me tae the ground. He paraded around in front o’ his men, waving his sword wildly. Almost took Gates’s head off once. So most o’ the men kept pretty quiet. He went on and on about how some o’ the British soldiers were soft on the filthy Scots who’d rebelled against King George, but he damn well wisna one o’ them. He meant tae teach me a lesson afore he turned me in.” The lieutenant had fixed Finn with a malevolent stare that had chilled him to the bone. At that point, he’d begun to fear for his life. “That’s when let fly wi’ the hilt o’ his sword a brawlin’ punch tae my eye.” Gingerly, Finn touched the bruised flesh. The eye had been swollen shut for a day. “I thought a nest o’ hornets had exploded in my head.”

“Dear Lord.” Miss Harper’s face paled. “And your hands were tied when he did this?”

“Aye. I truly thought he meant tae make an end tae me when he drew back his foot tae kick me. He had a savage look in his eye I’ve seen only once before, in a mad dog that lashed out at anyone in its path. But one o’ his men spoke up and said they needed tae get on the road if they wanted tae report t’ the garrison in Edinburgh by tomorrow.” That soldier’s remark may have saved Finn’s life, though it did the man no good. “Scarlet strode over tae the man without a word and backhanded him. Bloodied his nose. ‘I’ll be the one who says when we need tae move, Sayers.’”

The stricken look on Miss Harper’s face made Finn recall his audience might not wish to hear all the gory details.

“Fortunately, Scarlet then told them all tae mount up, but he looked at me and said ‘I’ll continue your lessons later, Scot.’”

“What a horrible, horrible man.” Miss Harper shivered. “No wonder Mrs. Jameson and Mr. Hawkins warned me of him.” She leaned forward. “How did you ever escape?”

“That night we camped in a boggy spot, and Scarlet started tae drink heavily as soon as we stopped. They’d untied my hands so I could eat, but I’d barely started when Scarlet said I’d had enough and knocked the plate out o’ my hands. Then he told the others I was a traitor tae the crown for wearing my kilt and should therefore receive the punishment for treason.” Finn raised an eyebrow at Miss Harper. “Dae ye ken what the Crown does tae those found guilty o’ that crime?”

“They put you to death.” The lady shuddered. “I suppose hanging is the normal way now.”

“Aye, hanging’s part o’ it, but only the first part. They then dae other things tae ye that are no’ sae pleasant.” The story of the Scottish hero Sir William Wallace had been told to Finn since he’d been a child, including the details of his gruesome death.

“Dear God.” Miss Harper had paled considerably. Perhaps he shouldn’t elaborate.

Hanging, drawing, and quartering was the standard method of death for traitors. Horrible enough, but, as Scarlet had informed his men, in medieval England, there had also been the added agony of emasculation. The lieutenant had laughed and said anything that would stop the production of Scots was an Englishman’s duty so they should start now with the prisoner at hand.

Finn shuddered just thinking about the maniacal glint in Scarlet’s eyes as he came toward him. “Aye, and when Lieutenant Scarlet began thinking tae

start my punishment afore I'd even been tried and convicted, well, I thought I'd best be parting company with the lot o' them."

"What did you do?" Eyes bright, Miss Harper hung on his every word.

"I waited until Scarlet was almost bending over me then I drew my legs up tae my chest and kicked him right in the stomach. He went sailing backward, intae two o' the others, knocking them over like ninepins. I ran for the horses, swung up on the biggest o' them, which happened to be Scarlet's, then scattered the others as I took off." Finn's pulse raced thinking of that harrowing escape. "The soldiers got off a few shots, but 'twas dark and they were fairly in their cups. They tried tae pursue me, but thankfully I got clean away. Fortunately, I know all the roads between Aberfoyle and Edinburgh, sae I found my way tae the Great North Road easily."

"Heading south to London, you said earlier." She cocked her head, and that suspicious gleam returned to her eyes. "Why not return to your home to straighten the matter out? You said this law is often flouted with no penalty."

"With Scarlet out for my blood, I dinna want tae take that chance, Miss Harper. The lieutenant would probably expect me tae head back home and would have overtaken me quickly. For that reason alone, I would have headed south, but in the end, I decided I needed tae get t' London."

"Why? What's in London?"

"My uncle, who's got great influence with Parliament. If anyone can get this sorted, he can." Finn prayed to God Uncle Abernethy could do so.

"How did you come to be in the ditch where I found you?" She wrinkled her nose. "You were certainly far from the Great North Road there."

Finn sighed. His luck had run shallow again. "T' avoid a tollbooth

two days ago, I struck out across an open field. My horse put his foot in a hole and pitched me over his head as he fell. I must have hit my head and passed out for when I came tae, the animal was nowhere tae be seen.”

“Then that’s how you sprained your ankle.” Miss Harper’s features relaxed. “That wasn’t Scarlet or his men’s doing.”

“Nae, only my own misfortune that time.”

“And still you wish to ride to London, more than five days from here.” She appraised him frankly, making Finn all too aware of his vulnerable state. “Do you honestly think you can ride so far in your current condition?”

Her disparaging tone set his teeth on edge. “Whether or no’ I can remains tae be seen, but attempt it I must. There are those there, my uncle among them, who have enough power tae countermand any charge Lieutenant Scarlet lays against me.”

“Could you not go to Leeds instead? It’s much closer.” The concern for him was back in Miss Harper’s voice. “You could lose yourself in the crowds and avoid the soldiers. They might not even look for you there, and if they did, it would likely not be for long.”

“A good scheme, Miss Harper. I am indebted tae ye once more.” He sketched an awkward bow. “It may have tae be my alternate plan if I find I canna ride far, but I must try tae press onward tae London as soon as possible.”

“You should remain here until you are well again.” A stubborn look came over her face, and he had to fight a smile. Miss Harper seemed used to getting her own way, but so was Finn.

“I’ll burden ye an’ yer hospitality for a wee while only, Miss Harper.” Now he’d see if he could discover a bit more about his lovely hostess. “I

would no' wish tae ruin yer reputation should my presence here become known."

She straightened and lifted her chin. "I assure you, my lord, that will not happen."

"No' even if 'twere revealed ye allowed a strange man tae reside with ye, without a chaperone?" He leaned closer and stared directly into Miss Harper's big blue eyes. "Come, lass, dinna ye ken 'tis dangerous tae be here all alone with me?"

Chapter 6

“What makes you think we are alone here, Lord Aberfoyle?” A shiver of dread coursed through Dora as she shot up from her seat. She’d decided to address the man according to his claim, despite her grave misgivings about his actual station.

“Because I’ve no’ seen a soul other than ye or yer servants the entire time I’ve been here.” The man seemed rather satisfied about his observations. “Yer parents would surely have put in an appearance immediately, if they were here.” He peered at her mercilessly. “Who are yer parents, if I may ask?”

With the truth on the tip of her tongue, Dora hesitated. If his claim of not knowing London Society was true, he likely wouldn’t recognize her parents’ names. But until she ascertained he was who he claimed, a little voice in the back of her mind whispered she should keep him in the dark as much as possible. The best way to do that, she’d learned, was to keep a person off balance. “Why do you believe I live with my parents? I could just as easily be the mistress of this estate.”

He grinned. “Ye said earlier this was yer father’s estate, but even so, ye dinna wear a wedding ring.”

She glanced down automatically and cursed under her breath—which was another admission, of course. “I may not have a husband, but I am the mistress of this estate at present, with servants enough to act as chaperones.” Staring into his face, she hardened her gaze. “And if you have any improper ideas, I daresay I could repulse your advances simply by outstripping your pace in your current condition.”

“True enough.” He chuckled, which reassured Dora, then turned

serious. "I fear only for yer reputation, Miss Harper. After the great kindness ye've shown me, I would hate tae have ye come tae harm through my presence here in yer house."

"Thank you, my lord." Touched by his concern, Dora backed up a step. She really should go before the young man's handsome face and charming manners *did* bring her to ruin. "I'll send Larkin up for the tray. I must attend to organizing tomorrow's tasks. If you will excuse me, I'll say goodnight."

"Good night, Miss Harper. Pleasant dreams."

"You as well." Dora turned and all but fled the room before the strong pull to sit down beside him took hold of her.

True, she'd had no company in the far north since her arrival in April. It was only to be expected that she would enjoy conversation with someone of her own station. If he was of her station. Somehow, now she believed he was telling the truth about that. The pain in his eyes when he spoke of his father's death, his obvious manners and way of speech declared him someone of good breeding. Someone who would be an eligible match in the eyes of Society. She shook her head and hurried down the corridor. If he weren't a criminal.

Dora paused on the steps. Why was she thinking about him being an eligible parti? She had no business entertaining such ideas about any man, much less a stranger to whom she'd not even been properly introduced. And even if they had, she couldn't believe her father would agree to a match with a wild Scotsman with a price on his head.

Not to mention Lord Aberfoyle would scarcely consider her eligible when he discovered she'd been betrothed before, jilted the man, and now had no dowry to her name. Her father had made it abundantly clear before she left

home that she could expect to be his dependent for the rest of her life. No one would want to marry her without some kind of compensation, which he would refuse to provide.

But still she sometimes allowed herself to dream.

Like now.

After consulting with Cook about tomorrow's menus, Dora climbed the steps again, more than ready for bed even though the evening light had not yet faded. However, the day had been trying in so many ways—the stress of evading the soldiers coupled with that of actually finding their prisoner, not to mention her unexpected and inexplicable attraction to her houseguest. So a long soak in a hot tub and a good night's sleep would put her world back into the proper perspective.

"Larkin, please prepare a bath for me. After that dip in the creek and all the excitement of the day, I need to soak and relax tonight." Dora sank down onto the chair before her dressing table, suddenly too weary to stand.

"Very good, miss." The maid rang for James and gave the order for hot water then bustled about the room readying the wooden tub.

Soon Dora was seated in hot water up to her chin, the steam coming off the surface gently caressing her face, adding to her comfort. At last, she settled back, breathing a deep sigh, and one by one her muscles began to relax.

"Shall I wash your hair, Miss Harper?" Larkin hovered over her, the jar of rose-scented soap flakes in her hand.

"Yes, please, Larkin." With a groan, Dora sat up. "We are likely to have visitors in the next day or so. I must look my best." Dora doubted Lieutenant Scarlet and his company would pass her by. She needed to be

ready, presenting a comely figure, and with a story to account for Lord Aberfoyle's presence in the house.

"Lean your head back."

Dora complied, and the hot water cascaded over her head, soothing her all over.

"Who do you think will be coming to call?" The maid raised an eyebrow. No one had come to call on her in the four months she'd been at Bromley.

"Not callers. Soldiers." Dora stared into Larkin's widening eyes. "Searching for an escaped prisoner."

Larkin jerked upright, the cup she'd been using to rinse Dora's hair clattering to the floor, splashing water everywhere. "Oh, I'm sorry, miss." The maid scrambled to mop up the mess. "You don't think his lordship..."

"I'm afraid he is, Larkin. He told me so himself." Dora steeled herself for hysterics.

"Gracious, Miss Harper." The maid was apparently made of sterner stuff for she rose, a little wobbly, her face a trifle paler than before, and resumed rinsing Dora's hair. "Whatever will you do?"

"Do?" Dora frowned at her maid. "What do you mean, Larkin?"

"With his lordship. Tonight." Larkin seemed to think Dora should do something with the man other than give him supper and a bed. "Are you going to lock him in his chamber?" The girl grabbed a piece of toweling as Dora rose then wrapped it around her dripping body.

"You think I should?" Startled that she hadn't thought of that precaution, Dora clutched the towel to her chest.

"That I do! To make sure he doesn't murder us in our beds." Larkin

gave Dora a knowing glance. “Or do something else in your bed, miss.”

Dora’s cheeks heated, although that could’ve just been the steam from the water. “I hardly think that will happen, Larkin. Lord Aberfoyle is a gentleman.” At least she hoped he was. “And he’s barely able to move, much less wreak havoc during the night.”

“Well, he must have committed some horrible crime to have been arrested by the soldiers.” Larkin rubbed Dora’s body vigorously with the towel, hard enough Dora feared she might take off the skin.

“He wore a kilt, is all, Larkin. That was his crime.”

The maid stopped her toweling and stared at Dora as though she’d run mad. “They arrested him for that?”

“It’s a long story, but yes, apparently, there’s a law against it. Suffice it to say his lordship is no true criminal.”

“You believed that story, miss?” Larkin gave her a disbelieving look before applying the towel to Dora’s hair.

Dora sighed, and the dregs of doubt began to creep into her mind. Perhaps she was being too naïve with a man she’d met only hours ago. If she was letting her attraction to him cloud her judgment, the whole household might suffer. There was something she could do to remedy that, although she couldn’t help but feel badly for not trusting Lord Aberfoyle’s word. “Take my keys and quietly lock his door. With any luck, he’ll sleep through the night and if you unlock it early enough, he’ll never be the wiser.”

“Yes, miss. I’ll go right now.” Larkin scooped Dora’s household keys from the decorated glass bowl on a table next to the door and hurried out.

Dora continued to sit, methodically squeezing water from her hair with the towel. She’d been so accepting of Lord Aberfoyle’s explanation,

she'd let her guard down. She couldn't allow herself to do that again. She doubted the man was dangerous and certainly was unable to get into any mischief with his wounded ankle. Still, it made her uneasy to think she'd accepted his story almost without pause. Blinded by his dark auburn hair, cool blue eyes, and charming smile.

A dangerous combination, it seemed.

Well, she'd restore her vision and see him with both eyes open from now on. Tomorrow morning, she'd assess his condition as best she could. She had some slight skill in tending to wounds and sickness, so she felt capable of treating him. After an evaluation, she'd know better if he could ride. If he were able to sit a horse, she'd loan him one of her father's, provide a packet of food, and send him off to London, if that was where he was determined to go. If not, she'd await the appearance of the soldiers, learn their version of the story, and cover Lord Aberfoyle's presence as best she could. Would Lieutenant Scarlet take her word there was no one save her and her servants in residence? What would she do if he insisted on searching the house?

One way or another, her quest for answers to these questions would keep her awake long into the night.

Next morning, after a very few hours of fitful sleep, Dora sat down bleary-eyed to breakfast. As she sipped her fragrant tea, trying to wake herself up, she hoped if anyone did appear they wouldn't notice the dark smudges under her eyes. She'd taken to her rouge pot this morning—something she rarely did—to give her the appearance of blooming health, if one didn't look too closely at her face. If they did, they would realize she was tired to the bone.

After tea, toast, eggs, and bacon, Dora persuaded herself she was ready to face the day and anything it would bring.

Larkin had informed her when she woke that she'd had taken Lord Aberfoyle's breakfast to him early and he'd seemed none the wiser about being locked in last night. She'd go up and see him shortly. Now, she needed to work out the details of the story she'd come up with in the earliest hours of the morning to explain his lordship's presence in the house. A wild plan, to be sure, but then desperate times called for desperate measures, or so they said. At the moment, Dora was inclined to agree with "them." If the plan actually worked, it would assure the earl's safety here for several days—long enough for him to regain his strength before continuing his journey.

The fact that she would also have several more days of his company didn't factor into the situation at all, of course.

James entered with a letter on a silver salver. "This just arrived by messenger, miss."

She frowned. In all the time she'd been at Bromley, she'd never had a letter delivered by messenger. "Are they waiting for an answer?" She peered at the letter, but the handwriting wasn't familiar.

"No, miss."

"Thank you, James." Strange. The footman retreated to the kitchen, and Dora turned the letter over and over in her hands. Addressed in a feminine hand, the letter created a puzzle in Dora's mind. It wasn't from Judith, for her letters always came by post. And sad to say, she had no other female friends who corresponded with her since she'd left her home in Wiltshire.

"The easiest way to find out who it's from is simply to open it, nitwit," she muttered.

Slipping the tip of her knife under the blob of wax popped the seal from the back, and she unfolded the single sheet, written only on two sides. She eagerly took it up.

My dear Dora,

You will find it odd that I am writing to you from Yorkshire when you must have thought Tris and I were already bound for Italy.

“Violet!” Dora sprang up from her chair, all thoughts fled save that of her friend. “She’s in Yorkshire?”

Her dear friend was now married to Lord Trevor after Dora had broken off her betrothal to the viscount in January. Dora had rejoiced in her friend’s happiness and had been given to believe the couple was bound for Italy on their wedding trip. That they were actually close to Dora—Lord Trevor’s estate abutted her father’s property—was a mystery, but one for which Dora gave thanks. She’d been lonely here in Yorkshire, no matter how she’d tried to deny it to herself. With Violet and Tris not two miles away, life would become bearable again.

She continued reading, delighted to find Violet urging her to call upon her immediately this morning at Yewtree Hall, Tris’s estate, for tea. Dora’s smile grew wider as she read. She couldn’t wait to inform Violet of all that had transpired with her Judith and her subsequent marriage to Lord Haxby. Not to mention her own adventures here at Bromley Manor, both when she’d first arrived and now that Lord Aberfoyle—

Dora gasped and clutched the letter to her chest. Should she tell Violet about Lord Aberfoyle? A risk either way, to be sure, for what Violet knew, Tris would surely find out as well. Although Dora would relish Tris’s

opinion on the situation, she also knew his nature. He'd be incensed that Dora had spent the night under the same roof as a strange man without a suitable chaperone.

Dora bit her lip and shook her head. She'd have to cross that bridge when she finally set foot on it. Meanwhile, she must check on her houseguest and make sure he was provided for while she was away.

Folding the letter, Dora rose and made her way swiftly to the first floor and her bed chamber. "Larkin, I need my riding habit. I am going to Yewtree Hall, and I believe I will ride."

"Your blue one is still being cleaned, miss." Larkin gave her an accusatory look. "However, it's my opinion it will never be the same again."

"Then my brown one will have to do." It didn't become her as well as the blue but now Violet was here, perhaps they could summon a mantua maker from York or Leeds and have a new one made. If her father would allow her the funds, that was. She sighed as Larkin stripped the pale gray day gown from her. She'd likely be wearing the brown habit until it fell off her if she had to wait for her father to provide.

Shortly, her toilette was complete and, taking her courage in hand, she made her way down the opposite corridor to the viscount's apartments. She knocked hesitantly on the door.

A gruff "Come in" was her only response.

That did not bode well.

Dread making her throat dry, Dora opened the door and automatically turned toward the bed, but it was empty other than a tray with the dishes piled up. Startled, she scanned the room and discovered Lord Aberfoyle sitting on the window ledge that overlooked the rear rose garden, his newly shaved face

showing obvious displeasure. Without benefit of his whiskers, the man looked quite a bit younger. And more ominous.

Even more disturbing, he was dressed in some of her brother's old clothing, which fit him well enough. Simon had been a little larger than the current wearer, but these clothes would certainly do for the moment. The suit of blue superfine was a little old fashioned—she couldn't remember when Simon had last been to Bromley—but otherwise suited Lord Aberfoyle. The linen shirt looked crisp, although it had surely been packed away in the closet. His lordship had tied a suitable if simple knot in his cravat and his ensemble was finished with his own boots, now polished to a shine. Larkin had worked wonders with his lordship's substitute clothing.

“Good morning, my lord.”

“Good morning.” He turned a stony face to her, and her stomach flipped back and forth. “I beg yer pardon, but I dinna have a chance last night tae inquire if it was the custom o’ this house tae lock its guests in each night?” He smiled, cold and sharp.

Dora wanted to flee the room.

“I merely wished tae know at what time I will be confined tonight sae I may decide if I wish tae continue tae avail myself o’ such ‘hospitality’ in future?”

His eyes glittered, and Dora held her breath, completely at a loss for words.

Chapter 7

“Cat got yer tongue, Miss Harper?”

The acid in Lord Aberfoyle’s tone rubbed Dora the wrong way, causing her guilt to evaporate. She’d been within her rights to confine him. It was her house, after all. “Not likely, my lord.” She drew herself up and narrowed her eyes. “I was merely startled to find you wearing my brother’s clothing. Can you tell me where you came by those garments?”

“Yer maid brought them tae me, along with a razor, after breakfast. A kindness I shall no’ forget.” He still looked daggers at her. “Nor will I forget the shock o’ finding my chamber door locked this morning.”

“May one inquire where you were planning to go so early?” Two could play at indignation. “And in such deshabelle?” She looked him up and down. “I assume it was before Larkin brought these clothes.”

“I had planned tae go in search o’ my clothes.” He nodded toward the door. “I’d no’ seen them since I came here, and I wished tae be decently dressed when I saw ye again.”

At that, Dora dropped her gaze. She couldn’t fault him for wanting to be properly attired in her presence. “I beg your pardon, my lord. I didn’t believe you’d be out of bed so soon. Larkin must have taken your clothing to clean it when she took my riding habit. They will be returned to you as soon as they are ready. In the meantime, you are welcome to avail yourself of my brother’s clothing.” She paused and gave a small sigh. “He has no more use for it.”

“I thank ye for that, Miss Harper.” He opened his mouth again, as though he wished to ask a question, but in the end closed it instead.

“I also apologize for locking your door, although I believe you can understand my reasons for doing so.” Dora raised her head to look him squarely in the eyes. “I am responsible for all those in my household, and therefore I deemed it safer for all concerned to have you confined while you were sleeping.” She shrugged. He could take her apology or not. “I decided to err on the side of caution. I hope you can see the sense of that.”

“I suppose I can appreciate yer decision there, Miss Harper. Now I think o’ it, I’d wish my sister tae show such caution should the need ever arise for her t’ dae sae.” He cocked his head and gave her an appraising look. “Ye’ve not told me yet why ye’re here alone save for servants? Were yer parents called away unexpectedly, perhaps?”

“Suffice it to say they are from home at the moment, my lord.” Dora refused to be drawn out about her vulnerability. Best focus on his. “So your ankle is much improved?” She nodded to his leg. “You can walk on it without pain now?”

Lord Aberfoyle grunted and shifted his position. “’Tis better, thank ye, although I’m no’ yet pain free. I can bear some weight on it, but I’m no’ sure I can ride yet.” He looked inquiringly at her. “I wondered if I might try it out in the saddle this morning. If ye might like tae accompany me, tae keep an eye on me, as it were.” He grinned, and Dora relaxed for the first time since entering the room. “I see ye’re dressed tae ride.”

“I am. However, I’m afraid I cannot ride with you this morning, my lord. I’m on my way to visit a friend who just arrived in the neighborhood.”

His face fell a trifle, which made Dora’s heart beat faster. “I understand.”

“Perhaps when I return this afternoon, we can ride out and test your

ankle.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, his mouth pinched. “I believe I’m capable o’ riding on my own, lass.”

“Under usual circumstances, perhaps. With your ankle an unknown, I insist on accompanying you, my lord.” She stared evenly into his face. Trusting him with her horse unaccompanied would be foolhardy. “It’s only common courtesy.”

“That’s kind o’ ye, lass.” But he seemed put out by her suggestion.

“My pleasure, my lord.” She beamed broadly at him. “We must needs keep you safe.”

“Then thank ye, Miss Harper. I find myself even more in yer debt.” He made an elegant bow, showing a rueful smirk as he straightened.

Why was it whenever he smiled, her legs wanted to turn to jelly?

“Will you accompany me downstairs now, my lord? I’ll make sure you are provided for some entertainment while I am gone.” Dora turned to the door. “There’s a library that’s fairly well stocked. And the garden is quite lovely this time of year, but I wouldn’t stray too far from the house. I would remind you that the soldiers are likely lurking about the countryside. You’d not want them to see you.”

He chuckled as he followed her out of the room. “That is one piece o’ advice I will be sure tae heed. I want neither tae be apprehended again nor bring the troop’s wrath down upon yer household, Miss Harper.”

“I thank you for that assurance, my lord.” They took the stairs together and when they reached the entry hall, Dora called for the footman.

“James, please have Gretchen saddled for me.”

“Yes, miss.” James gave one inquisitive look at his lordship then

made an abrupt about-face and hurried from the room.

As they walked out the front door, Dora had a sudden misgiving about Lord Aberfoyle's plan for the day. "If you intend to stroll the property, you really should keep to the park near the house." She pointed to the grassy lawn to the right of the driveway. "A couple of turns around the driveway and a short path through those trees should give you some exercise for your ankle. If you wander farther afield, you might encounter the soldiers." She frowned. "Of course, they may very well appear here anyway, but I still think you will be safer if you stay close to the house."

"I will keep that in mind, Miss Harper." The cheerful smile on his lips, however, told her he would likely traipse all over the estate. Some men simply thrived on danger.

James appeared, leading her horse, and Lord Aberfoyle stepped in quickly, albeit with a grimace, to give her a leg up into the saddle. "A much easier mount than yesterday, dinna ye agree?"

"I do, my lord." She sat thinking for a moment and sighed. "I'd like Alfred to accompany me today, James. The countryside is less quiet of late, and I am riding to see friends who will expect me to be accompanied. Will you tell him I'll wait for him here?"

"I could ride with ye, Miss Harper." Lord Aberfoyle jumped in eagerly with his offer. "It would give me both the chance tae stretch this leg and ye could keep an eye on me in case Scarlet puts in an appearance."

She might have known he'd suggest that. Shaking her head, she said, "I'm sorry, my lord, but that simply won't do." She broke off to look at the groom. "Go tell Alfred to saddle a horse, James." Then she turned back to the earl, whose face had fallen a foot. "Surely you must see, my lord, that I would

have no way to explain your presence to my friends.” It would be hard enough to keep him a secret from Violet as it was. And if Tris caught wind of it—“Lord Trevor, in particular, would be irate if he knew you had spent the night here.”

“Why is he sae protective o’ ye?” Lord Aberfoyle stared pointedly at her, a frown beginning to darken his brows. “Is he a relative?”

“Not exactly.” There was no good way to explain her connection to Tris save to state it baldly. “I was betrothed to him last year and jilted him earlier this year so he could wed another. Now I fear he may feel responsible for me in some manner.” She’d not seen Tris since his wedding in January, but Violet had written to her that Tris felt guilty that her father had banished her. For one who knew Tris, it was no small leap to assume he would try to rectify the matter as best he could. This visit would allow her to gauge how serious Tris was going to be about interfering in her life.

He crossed his arms over his chest and fixed her with a steely eye. “Perhaps the gentleman *should* bear some responsibility.”

“Please do not trouble yourself over my concern, my lord.” The last thing Dora needed was the earl confronting Tris. There’d be another duel, and she’d have more blood on her hands. “I’m certain I can manage. Alfred, are you ready?” she called to the lad trotting up to her, James right behind him, and blew out a sigh of relief.

“Yes, miss.”

“Very good, then.” She turned back to the earl, and was struck anew by how handsome he was, even in his borrowed clothes. What would he look like turned out to the nines? She gave herself a little shake to dispel that image. “I hope to return early enough for us to ride, but if not, we will have to

postpone it until tomorrow and I shall see you at dinner. We dine at six o'clock in the country."

"I shall look forward tae it." His eyes took her in from top to toe, and she regretted the brown habit once again. "Enjoy your ride."

Dora grinned. "Thank you, my lord. Enjoy your morning." She touched her heel to Gretchen's flank, and the horse dutifully broke into a trot.

"I will, Miss Harper," he called after her.

Heading down the driveway, unable to see Lord Aberfoyle, but the back of her neck prickling, Dora tried to dismiss the idea that he was watching her ride away. Alfred was at her heels so she couldn't very well turn around and look. But when they reached the road, she paused and shot a glance back toward the house.

Unmoving, Lord Aberfoyle still stood in the driveway, watching her.

Dora shivered. If she hesitated further, he might take that as a sign of her interest or an invitation of some sort. Urging Gretchen into a canter, she quickly passed out of his sight and could relax once more. This visit was a long-awaited treat.

Finn waited until Miss Harper and her groom disappeared before turning to James. "Your assistance please, lad." He stalked around the house, heading for the stable.

"Where are you going, my lord?" The groom trotted along behind him, uncertainty in his voice.

"I'm going tae saddle one o' Miss Harper's wee beasts and have a trot about the estate." Despite Miss Harper's request that he not ride in her absence, Finn saw no reason why he shouldn't test his ankle with a little turn

around the park. They reached the stable, and he was assailed by the comforting smells of horses, leather, hay, and manure.

“But Miss Harper—”

“Miss Harper is merely trying tae devil me, lad. Tae assert her authority when it makes nae nevermind whether or no’ I ride alone.” Finn summoned all the dignity he could muster. “I wish tae have this horse saddled.” He pointed to a grand, tall beast, coal black with an intelligent eye, and glared at the groom. “Or I’ll dae it myself, lad.”

Reluctantly, the footman did as he was told, though he continued to stare at Finn, a grim look on his face.

Miss Harper’s instructions dispensed with, Finn mounted, gathered his reins. “What’s his name?”

“Hannibal, my lord.”

The groom looked none too happy, but Finn was determined to try his ankle and taste a little freedom in the process. He moved the big stallion down the driveway at a fast walk. Miss Harper still didn’t trust him, so he could understand why she wanted to ride with him. And he’d certainly have preferred riding with her. The lady sat her horse to perfection. Of course, she’d have to be an excellent horsewoman to have maneuvered them home yesterday with him unconscious. Riding well was a quality he’d always admired in women.

Still, he could not waste a whole morning in a stuffy library or picking flowers in the garden waiting for Miss Harper to return. When he presented himself and her horse this afternoon, safe and sound, perhaps she would begin to trust him a smidgeon more.

He urged his horse to a trot and winced as his ankle sent a twinge of

pain up his leg. But only a twinge now. Much better than before, thank goodness. The pain level had diminished by more than half since yesterday. With an injury painful enough to cause him to pass out twice, he'd truly feared a break. Now it seemed to be mending nicely.

After trotting for some minutes, Finn pushed Hannibal into a canter. A throbbing ache appeared briefly then settled down to a dull nuisance. Encouraged, he turned off to the left lawn, where Miss Harper had directed him, and gave the horse his head. If he ran into the soldiers once on the road, he needed to be able to ride swiftly. When the trees thinned and the plowed land opened out, he'd try his hand at a gallop.

The estate was lovely, and he took a moment to look at it before it was hidden by the trees. Set well back from the front road, the manor house of orange-red brick had obviously been built in an earlier age, for it held no hint of the Palladian style currently in fashion. Still, its symmetry made it very pleasing to the eye. A curved driveway, flanked by tall trees on either side, gave the property an elegance he found restful. Somehow, it suited Miss Harper with her no-nonsense manner. Although he'd been more than a little miffed to find himself a prisoner this morning, he did understand the logic of such a precaution on her part. It hadn't stopped him from railing against her, but she'd stood up to him, which had also pleased him. His hostess was proving a delightful companion. More than any other woman of his acquaintance, that was certain.

If only he didn't need to leave for London. Without this devilish arrest hanging over his head, he could remain here and get to know her better. Much better, if he had his way.

Of course, if he hadn't been arrested and escaped the soldiers, he'd

likely never have met Miss Harper. Perhaps his luck hadn't deserted him when he'd been taken by Lieutenant Scarlet after all.

He sighed and struck out through a fallow field across the road from the manor house. Perhaps on his return from London—God willing, a free man—he could return here and visit Miss Harper again. Renew their budding friendship. Despite his troubles, Finn had found himself thinking more about the young woman who'd rescued him and less about planning his journey. It had occurred to him that she was a perfectly acceptable candidate to be his wife, a thought he'd never had before. Something about the combination of kindness and a backbone of steel was wildly appealing. He'd never considered the characteristics he wanted in a wife, but now those two were at the top of the list. Along with wit, spirit, and beauty. And since Miss Harper possessed all those attributes in abundance, that made her his first choice of possible wives. Of course, his list currently had a single name.

Finn's musings had distracted him so much he'd given Hannibal his head once more. The horse had carried him across the fallow field toward a burn Finn recognized as the one in which he'd hidden himself yesterday. That sent a nasty shock through him, and he reined the horse down to a walk and patted his neck. "Did ye want a drink o' water, my fine fellow? I dinna blame you. 'Tis hot as Hades." He urged the horse toward the embankment. "Here we go. Have yer drink, lad."

The horse whinnied and jogged down the slight bank to stand in the cool water and lower his head to drink.

Finn would've liked to have done the same, for the August sun seemed to be shining brighter than usual and directly on him alone. But if he got down, could he get back up? Perhaps he shouldn't have dispensed with

James after all. Hannibal, a thoroughbred, stood at least sixteen, and possibly closer to seventeen, hands high. While he'd had no trouble leaping up onto Miss Harper's horse, Gretchen was a much shorter animal. Could he perform the same feat on the bigger horse? Well, if worst came to worst, he could lower the stirrup so he could remount. Not ideal, but not an impossibility either.

When Hannibal had drunk his fill, Finn nudged him up the bank and into the shade of the trees. Finn jumped down then tied the reins to a prickly bush nearby. Taking one last look around, he moved cautiously back to the burn and half walked, half slid down the embankment to the swift-flowing stream. He knelt on the thick ferns at the water's edge and scooped up a handful, relishing the cool drink as it slid down his throat. His ankle had ceased throbbing, so the exercise had apparently helped rather than hurt it. That boded well for him continuing his journey in the next day or so.

The thought of his imminent departure both pleased and tortured him. While he must go to London to escape the vicious Lieutenant Scarlet, he wished just as strongly to remain here, with Miss Harper. An irrational desire, but his desire, nevertheless. Folly were he to act on it. He must make his own safety and ultimately that of the earldom his priority. He must find his uncle—who would know exactly which officials to contact—and ask him to sort this whole muddle out.

What kept whirling around Finn's head, however, was the fact that with his escape, he'd made a fool of Lieutenant Scarlet. Should he fall into the man's clutches again, he'd most likely be summarily executed. The wild look in Scarlet's eyes when he'd accused Finn of treason could only mean that the lieutenant would take justice into his own hands if he ever had the chance

again. Never mind that it was illegal; Scarlet's men would say nothing when they turned his body in save that Finn had been caught after escaping. Or worse, he'd be dumped in some unmarked grave and neither his uncle nor anyone else would ever know what had become of him.

That thought sent a chill down Finn's spine. Goose walking over his grave. He shivered and stood up. He needed to return to Bromley and plan his journey tomorrow. No need to wait for his fickle luck to turn tail again. The sooner he quit this countryside, the sooner he'd be safe from Scarlet and his men.

With quick steps, he climbed the bank and freed Hannibal's reins. He tried to slip his foot into the stirrup, but it kept sliding out. Damn, he'd have to lower it. What a time to have misjudged the matter. Retethering the horse, Finn kept listening for any sound out of the ordinary. He'd finally lowered the stirrup as low as it would go when a dull rumble, seeming to come from beneath the ground, brought his head up. Holding his breath, he tried to determine where the noise came from. He immediately recognized it as the thunder of hooves. Unmistakable when one had heard it all their lives. Curse the return of his bad luck.

The horses sounded nearer now, coming from further up the burn, likely just out of sight behind a little stand of trees. He might have time to mount, but they would surely spot him riding away for the trees were too thin to provide much more than shade. And if he hid, the presence of a horse would give him away quicker than anything else.

A sickening sensation in his stomach, Finn loosened the reins and tied them to the saddle. "Go home, Hannibal," he whispered and slapped the horse on the rump.

The stallion threw up his head, turned, and bolted back the way they'd come.

Finn dove for the ground and wormed his way into the thicket of bushes he'd tethered the horse to earlier. With any luck, the troop would follow the stream, water their horses, and leave without checking the bushes on this side of the burn.

All Finn could do was try to make himself as invisible as possible.

And pray.

Chapter 8

“Violet!” How wonderful to see you.” Dora couldn’t wait for the staid butler to announce her. Instead, she rushed into the lovely yellow and pink drawing room and threw her arms around her friend. “My goodness, it’s been so long since—” Startled, Dora stopped midsentence, as a strangeness caught her attention. Something was surely different when she hugged Violet. Dora stepped back, taking in for the first time her friend’s more rounded form. And her broad smile. “Violet, are you...?”

Her smile widening, Violet, now Lady Trevor, nodded. “Increasing, yes. Very happily. Tris is more than thrilled. Come,” she took Dora’s hand and led her toward a cozy grouping of chairs, “let us sit. I’ll ring for a tea tray. I had Cook make Queen cakes just for the occasion.” She grinned at Dora and indicated a pretty little white-and-rose painted chaise covered in pink flowers on a delicate yellow background. “Please sit here, my dear.” She rang the bell then sat across from Dora on a comfortable looking Queen Anne chair in matching fabric.

“I am so very happy for you, Violet.” If anyone knew how much Violet loved children, it was Dora.

“I’m happy to be able to share the news with someone. All our friends from London scattered to the four winds once Parliament adjourned. We had thought to take a wedding trip to Italy with Lord and Lady Dalbury but,” her eyes twinkled, “when I discovered I was in an interesting condition, Tris insisted we remain in England. When you wrote me you were going to Yorkshire, I persuaded him to come here.”

“How delightful this will be.” Dora reached over and squeezed her

friend's hand. "I have to admit it's been rather dreary here without knowing anyone and no way to beg an introduction."

"Surely the vicar could—"

"Not after my father wrote to him forbidding him to even speak to me outside of the pulpit." Dora sighed. "And since my father holds the living in the area, the vicar had to obey. I really don't blame him. He's got quite a large family to feed."

"My dear, I am so very sorry your father took all his anger out on you." Violet squeezed her hand back. "Tris and I feel responsible for your exile. You must have had a horrible time of it here."

"Less difficult than you might imagine." Dora sat back, hands in her lap. She'd all but forgotten that Violet's actions to save Tris had caused Dora's brother's death. Despite that, Dora held her no ill will. Her brother had been acting dishonorably—he'd tried to shoot Lord Trevor in the back after the duel—and to save him, Violet had clubbed Simon to the ground. He'd never regained consciousness. "After Simon died, Father allowed me to take Judith back to her parents' home."

"You wrote to me of her miraculous recovery." Violet motioned the footman to enter with the tea tray. "Thank you, Fox." She waited until the tall, handsome footman left before continuing. "I do wish Fox was not quite so good looking. Tris wants to sack him, just because I remarked this morning that if I got tired of looking at the artwork, I could look at Fox instead."

"Violet, you didn't." They both laughed, and Violet poured the tea. "I'm certain Tris will go mad. Poor Fox. But he is quite nice to look at, isn't he?" Dora added two lumps of sugar to her tea and stirred.

"If only he were not a footman, my dear, I would say we should match

him with you.” Violet sipped her tea and took up one of the heart-shaped cakes. “Is there no Society here in Yorkshire where you might become acquainted with suitable gentlemen? Now that Tris and I are here, we can make introductions and chaperone you when necessary.”

Lord Aberfoyle’s face arose before Dora’s eyes, but she steadfastly shoved it aside. “I daresay there is in York or Leeds. Even in the neighborhood hereabout, I suppose they have balls or entertainments. But even with your assistance, I sadly have no proper clothes. Father sent me here on the spur of the moment, barely allowing me time to pack the clothing I possessed, much less have new ones made.” Dora shook her head. “You needn’t feel responsible for me, Violet. Neither should Tris. I broke the betrothal. He shouldn’t feel any obligation toward me.”

“Dora, you know full well he does. Your punishment has weighed heavily on his heart. He’s well aware, too, of the damage to your reputation.” Violet’s hand strayed to her belly.

Yes, her reputation was in tatters, no matter that it was undeserved. Even though most betrothed couples anticipated the wedding night, she and Tris had not. Actually, they’d barely kissed during their betrothal. But her father was apparently correct in saying that everyone assumed the worst. “Well, we all know the truth of that, although I doubt we could make anyone else believe us.” Dora shrugged. She’d thought of this conundrum incessantly these past four solitary months. “I will simply have to find a gentleman who is willing to believe me when I tell him I am untouched.” She chuckled. “Easier to find one who will believe that than one who will take me without a dowry.”

Dropping her gaze, Violet fiddled with her cup. “I’m so sorry, Dora. You know Tris would provide you with a dowry if your father would allow

it.”

“Which he most certainly would not. Neither would he agree for me to wed, and as I’m only nineteen, I cannot think of marrying without his consent for another two years at least.” Not that she believed she’d be able to do so even then. Too many circumstances stood against her.

“Unless you eloped to Scotland.” Violet sent her a sidelong look, and Dora’s heart skipped a beat.

Had her friend somehow learned of Lord Aberfoyle’s presence?

“Scotland?” It was all she could think to say.

“Gretna Green is all the rage with eloping couples these days, although anywhere on Scottish soil will suffice.” Violet’s eyes were bright with merriment, but nothing more. “No ladies of my acquaintance have done anything so scandalous, but scarcely a week went by in Town without a Gretna Green marriage being mentioned in the scandal sheets.”

“Thank goodness you were of age, my dear.”

Dora’s head snapped up at Tristan’s voice.

“Else I might have had to resort to Gretna myself.” Lord Trevor sauntered into the drawing room, his commanding presence immediately becoming the focus of the chamber.

Even though Dora had willingly released him from his promise of marriage, her heart still stuttered at the sound of his voice and the sight of his darkly handsome face.

“So good to see you again, my dear.” He came toward Dora and dropped a chaste kiss on her cheek. No spark sizzled between them, which was as it should be.

Never had there been anything more than a friendly feeling for her

from Tris. Even so, had they actually married, she would likely have fallen in love with him rather quickly—with a kind, handsome, dashing man that would be easy enough to do—but she'd managed to escape a marriage where the affection would have been unrequited and therefore disastrous. And in the end, Tris had married the woman he truly adored.

If only she could find a man who felt that way about her.

“And to see you as well, Tris.” She smiled up at him. He was much taller than Lord Aberfoyle, and older. Staid instead of impulsive. Altogether a very different man from the one she might now fancy.

“Is anything wrong?” Tris's piercing blue eyes were hawklike in their ability to pick out the smallest differences in her manner.

“No, nothing save my surprise at your appearance in Yorkshire.” She needed to change the subject before things got awkward. “And my astonishment that Violet is increasing. Congratulations to both of you.”

If she knew Tristan at all, they would now converse about Violet and their expected progeny for the remainder of the visit.

True to form, Tris beamed at her then at Violet, the light in his eyes changing when he gazed at his wife to an intensity and depth of love that was almost palpable. That was the look Dora wanted from a man more than anything else in the world. It was the look that had made her break their betrothal, for she'd understood immediately that Tris would never look at her, never look at any other woman, exactly that way. So now Violet was Lady Trevor and about to have the family Dora longed for. How strange so much could turn on a single look.

Tris went on about Violet, their hopes for an heir, for an easy birth, for a skilled midwife. “Had I known of this before Dalbury left, I could have

asked for the name of the woman who attended Kat, although I suppose I could write to Juliet, his sister. She was confined about the same time and as they arranged to lie in together, they employed the same woman.”

“Do you think she would travel so far north, my dear?” Violet took his hand and drew her husband to her. “Gloucestershire is quite a journey.”

“If I paid her handsomely enough and arranged for comfortable travel for her and a companion, I believe she would think it a boon. By December, the countryside will be recovered from the excitement once again.” Tris took a sip of his tea, his brows drawn down.

“What excitement, Tris?” An inkling of foreboding shivered down Dora’s spine. “I haven’t heard of any excitement recently.”

Tris’s frown deepened. “Surely you’ve heard of the soldiers searching the area for an escaped prisoner? They may be at Bromley this very minute.”

Controlling his breathing to keep it shallow gave Finn something to concentrate on as he pulled himself further into the little stand of prickly bushes. He prayed he’d have the urge neither to cough nor sneeze and gave thanks the ground was somewhat moist beneath him. Drawing his knees up so his legs wouldn’t give him away, Finn settled into a slight depression in the ground and listened to the approaching hooves. If his luck had truly changed, they’d continue along the burn and bypass him completely. Perhaps they’d go to Miss Harper’s estate, find no one at home, poke around a bit, and leave before either of them returned. A lot to ask of luck that had been capricious at best, but he was surely due a smidgeon of good fortune.

The sound of hooves increased, coming from further up the stream, the way he’d been headed. Now the jingling of bits and spurs reached him as

the troop came almost abreast him on the opposite bank. They could as easily stop somewhere else as here. The burn went on for miles. Surely they would continue...

"Halt!" The unmistakable voice of Lieutenant Scarlet forced a muted curse out of Finn. Could this day get worse? "Dismount. Water your horses and yourselves."

"We makin' camp here tonight, Lieutenant?"

Finn held his breath and prayed as never before. If they camped here, it would be hours before he'd be able to crawl out of the bushes undetected. And a mile or more trek in the darkness, with a gammy ankle, when he didn't know the way back to the estate would stretch his luck past bearing. He'd likely do better waiting here until the soldiers moved on tomorrow morning.

"No, we've more farms to check before nightfall. I've secured us lodgings at The Golden Lion in Northallerton for the night. After a week on the road, I wanted some decent food and an actual bed."

"And some soft company to go with it, I'll wager?"

The group laughed then quieted abruptly.

"I won't condemn such behavior." Scarlet's stern voice made Finn cringe. "However, you'd damn well better be ready to move at first light so we can find this bloody Scotsman and go home."

"We moving on to York tomorrow, Lieutenant?"

Finn's ears pricked up.

"We've one more estate in the area to search. From what I've gathered, it belongs to a viscount who is from home, though his daughter has been in residence about four months. No one's been able to tell me much about her, saving she keeps to herself."

“Maybe she needs a bit o’ companionship, eh, Lieutenant?” The eagerness in the soldier’s tone sent flames of outrage licking through Finn’s veins. He wanted to tear out of the bushes, leap into the middle of the soldiers, and throttle the coarse bugger who’d said that about Miss Harper. He must get away and return to the estate to warn her.

“Tempting idea, Hopkins, but we’ve no time for dalliances of that sort.” Scarlet’s voice had hardened in a blink. It cut through the ribald chattering that had broken out among the soldiers. “Unless, of course, she’s been harboring the blackguard. In that case, do what you will to her and her household.”

Finn ground his teeth in outrage at Scarlet’s reprehensible instructions. Now it was imperative that he return to Bromley as quickly as possible, inform Miss Harper of the lieutenant’s plans, and leave her house immediately lest he bring ruin down upon her. Without him actually in residence, there was a better chance to conceal his presence there this past day. His blood continued to rage at the insult to Miss Harper, but even graver was the realization of how vulnerable she actually was at the estate without proper protection. These men were merely one danger a lone woman faced. Why had her parents left her alone and all but defenseless? He’d ask her if there was some other family member who could stay with her until her parents returned.

A stinging bite on Finn’s right arm brought him out of his thoughts. He brushed at it, trying to see the culprit, and his arm hit a branch of the bush.

“What was that?”

Finn froze, terrified to breathe, hoping he’d not just given himself away.

One of the soldiers was coming closer, the thud of his boots getting louder by the second.

“What is it, Gates?” Scarlet sounded annoyed rather than alarmed.

“Something rustled in the bushes up there, on the bank opposite.”

“A rabbit most likely. Leave it. Dinner’s awaiting us at the Golden Lion. Everyone, mount up.”

Maddened that he couldn’t see more, Finn held still, praying Gates would obey his commander and abandon his hunt.

“A coney’d taste right good, though, don’t you think, lieutenant?” Gates’s voice was closer, followed by the unmistakable sound of water splashing as the soldier forded the stream to Finn’s side. “Better vittles than any inn could serve.”

Finn closed his eyes, sickened that his own folly would once again be his undoing. The only comfort he could take from his capture would be that the soldiers would have no need to visit Miss Harper’s estate. She would be safe, unmolested by Scarlet or his men. Would she wonder what had happened to him? He prayed her horse had made it back to its stable. He’d hate to have her believe he’d taken the animal and headed to London.

The crack of a twig near his head told him Gates was upon him. Actually standing over him, most likely. The bushes, while thick enough above, were spindly below. If the soldier leaned down and looked underneath, Finn would be totally exposed to his view. Defenseless.

Well, not completely defenseless. A stout branch had broken off one of the bushes some time ago. It lay near his head. If he could use the element of surprise, bash Gates on the head, then crawl from bush to bush in the direction the soldiers had come from, he might manage another escape in the

general confusion. Odds were much longer this time, but it was worth a try.

He closed his fingers around the dead branch, careful to be as silent as possible. The smooth, hard stick felt good in his hand. Any weapon was a godsend to the hunted. Listening keenly for Gates's next footfall, Finn had a sudden surge of optimism. He was going to escape Scarlet's men again, run straight back to Miss Harper's manor house, and hopefully be a wiser and more prudent man.

Gates stepped directly beside Finn and drew his pistol. "I've got you now, little bugger," he whispered, and cocked the weapon.

Chapter 9

Glad she had already swallowed her tea, Dora paused to compose her face before answering Tris. She wished to speak truthfully, but not if it meant giving away any information regarding Lord Aberfoyle. “No, they have not put in an appearance at Bromley yet, however I did hear they were in the neighborhood yesterday. They had come by The Green Tree and Mrs. Jameson told me who they were looking for. Then I just missed them at Mr. Hawkins’s cottage. I daresay they will come by this afternoon or tomorrow.”

“I cannot remember anything so exciting ever happening in this area.” Tris grinned, making him look very boyish. “I quite envy them the chase.”

“You cannot mean that, Tris.” Violet tapped his knee. “I pity the poor man they are after.”

“My dear, you would sympathize with the fox during a hunt.” He lifted her hand and kissed the knuckles. “But I suspect you wouldn’t be so compassionate toward the villain if he were to break in here and threaten you. When they called this morning, I almost offered my services to help in the capture.” He patted Violet’s arm. “But we are scarcely settled in here, so I didn’t like to leave you alone, sweetheart.”

“Did the soldiers say what crime the fugitive had committed?” Dora prayed they had. If their account matched Lord Aberfoyle’s, she could rest easy that he had told her the truth.

“Fearing the worst, I asked them. If he was arrested for murder or had accosted a woman, I meant to take Violet and leave immediately for York until they apprehended him.” Tris’s frown had deepened into a scowl.

“And were either of those his crime?” Dora tried to act naturally but

still held her breath.

Tris fixed her with an impatient eye. “As we have not left the county, Dora, you can assume they were not, although the charge is quite serious.”

“What is it?” She edged forward on her seat.

“Treason.”

“Goodness.” Violet squeaked and grabbed Tris’s hand. “Did he attempt to injure the king in some way? Why didn’t you tell me any of this, my love?”

“I didn’t wish to worry you, Violet. Not in your condition.” He turned to Dora. “It’s actually more of a tempest in a cream pot.”

At that, Dora perked up. “What do you mean?”

“The prisoner is a Scotsman who apparently wore a kilt.” Tris snorted. “No sense, these young fire eaters.”

“He wore a kilt?” Puzzled, Violet looked from her husband to Dora. “That’s considered treason?”

Tris nodded. “From what Lieutenant Scarlet told me, it’s tantamount to it.”

“I heard it violates something called The Dress Act.” Dora had to slip that little fact in.

“The Dress Act?” Tris turned an inquisitive eye on her. “How do you know about that, Dora?”

Licking her lips, Dora pulled out every ounce of subterfuge she possessed. “Lord Haxby spoke of it when I was staying with Judith. He was a family friend, and is now her husband. When he inherited the earldom, it included several estates in Scotland. He told us about a tenant there who’d broken that law.” Amazed as lie after lie tumbled from her lips, Dora was

helpless to stop. “He said the law is rather stringent in its punishments, but breaking it is not considered treason.”

“No, usually it’s not.” Tris looked at her strangely, but she must carry on and discover as much as she could about what he knew.

“Do you know what the usual penalty is?” Fearing he could hear her very thoughts—which at the moment were only about Lord Aberfoyle—Dora attempted to turn the subject to Tris.

“Six months of prison for a first offense, if I remember correctly.” Tris stirred his tea. “Transportation for a second.”

“Did the lieutenant tell you that?” She needed to make certain Scarlet knew the actual law. He should have done, but she’d like corroboration.

“No.” Tris frowned, a puzzled look on his face. “That particular law has been discussed in the Lords several times since I took my seat.” He peered at her. “Are you interested in it for some reason, Dora?”

“Not particularly.” With a shrug, Dora tried to affect disinterest. “When Lord Haxby spoke of it, I found it fascinating that wearing a simple piece of clothing could have such dire consequences. Still,” she shook her head, “according to the law, it’s not treason.” From the pensive look Tris had leveled at her, Dora should stop speaking immediately. Somehow, she couldn’t. “So if one broke that law they should be put in prison or transported, not hanged for treason.”

“That is correct.” Tris tapped a finger against his lips. “You seem to be well versed in this law, Dora. Pity the knowledge will do you no good whatsoever.”

“I suppose not.” She laughed, but it was forced, and Tris could surely tell. “But it was interesting to hear how the laws work.”

“Dora, are you quite well, my dear?” Violet leaned over to pat her hands. “You’re rather pale.”

“I beg your pardon. I’m not used to company now, Violet. I’m so alone at Bromley with just the servants and Larkin for company. I suppose I don’t know how to act around others anymore.” There was truth in that statement, at least. “Do forgive me if I seem strange.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear.” Violet squeezed her hands. “Now we will be in residence here you need not be so lonely anymore. You must come stay with me here and we can plan an entertainment for you. Tris, you know the families hereabout do you not? We can introduce Dora to them.”

“A fine idea, my love, although you mustn’t overdo.” He slid his arm around his wife’s shoulders. “You’re carrying my heir, God willing, and we must take no chances with him. Or her.”

“Thank you so much, my dears.” Dora rose, wishing fervently to return home now she was certain Lord Aberfoyle had indeed told her the truth. Not that she’d doubted him, exactly, but Trish’s information made her more apt to accept his lordship’s word. She also needed to inform the earl of the imminent visit and the idea she had to avoid his detection when the soldiers came. “I fear Violet will be overtired if I stay longer. You have been traveling so recently I’m afraid you need much more rest. I will call on you again in a few days, when you are both more settled in.”

“When you return, we must engage the mantua maker to repair your wardrobe, Dora.” Violet rose slowly and embraced her friend. “Tris is having my harp sent out from London. We can continue our lessons and play a concert for Tris before long.” Her eyes twinkled. “Perhaps for some of the neighbors.” Impulsively, she hugged Dora again. “We will find you a

gentleman who will love you as he ought to, Dora. I know he's there somewhere," she whispered.

"I pray that is true," she replied, Lord Aberfoyle's face rising in her mind.

"Allow me to escort you home, Dora." Tris offered her his arm.

She took it but thought furiously of an excuse for him not to accompany her. "That is very thoughtful of you, Tris, but I must insist you stay to take care of Violet." She dropped her voice conspiratorially. "She looked tired, but I'm certain she would not rest until you return." If anything would keep him here, it was his devotion to his wife. "I have Alfred to accompany me, and the house is less than a mile from here. I shall be home and changing for dinner in no time."

"I suspect you are right, my dear." He led her to the massive stone foyer. "Violet does need to rest." He peered into her face, and Dora caught her breath at the keen concern there. "However, I will also make certain you arrive safely. If I cannot accompany you myself, allow me to send you home in my carriage."

"That is very generous and considerate of you, Tris. Thank you." A good compromise, and one that would not reveal her secret.

"I can never repay your kindness, Dora, in allowing me to marry Violet. Anything I can do for you, anything at all, you have but to name it and it is yours." He lifted her hand to his lips and grazed them over her knuckles.

At that moment, she almost—almost—confided in him. She needed advice regarding Lord Aberfoyle from someone who was worldly enough to know the best course for him. Tris would be one such man, but that protective streak would outstrip any other consideration. He'd probably kill the earl if he

knew the man was residing under her roof. His desire to keep her safe and her reputation intact would override any thought for her wishes or happiness. She therefore must keep her own council involving the earl for a little while longer. “Thank you, Tris. I will consider that offer—when the time comes.”

“Very well, then. Let me call for the carriage.”

They stood talking of inconsequential things until the luxurious black lacquered Town coach with the Trevor crest on the doors pulled up to the steps.

Tris handed her in and shut the door. “Until your return, Dora. I pray it is as swift as Apollo’s horses.”

“Flatterer.”

He laughed and nodded to the coachman who started the team.

Dora sat back in the plush leather seats and relaxed for the first time since Tris had appeared. She’d gotten information she desperately needed and now could speak more freely with Lord Aberfoyle.

Alfred had left on horseback, leading Gretchen. Hopefully, he’d inform Larkin she was on her way. Dinner was always at six, and she’d been unwilling to alter it. She’d have sufficient time to dress, but just barely. She hoped Lord Aberfoyle was attentive at dinner, for she had much to apprise him of, especially her suspicion that they would receive a visit from Lieutenant Scarlet tomorrow morning. Whatever else, they must be prepared for him. They would be, if the plan forming in her mind could be implemented in time.

Shortly, the carriage pulled up before the Bromley manor house.

Hanson opened the door and took her gloves and hat. “Miss Larkin is waiting for you, Miss Harper. Alfred arrived ten minutes ago and told us of

your change in plans.”

“Thank you, Hanson. Will you tell Lord Aberfoyle I may be a few minutes late coming down?” She needed a good wash and wanted Larkin to do something special with her hair tonight.

“Lord Aberfoyle has not yet returned from his ride, Miss Harper.” Hanson looked somber.

“His ride?” Bloody hell. “He wasn’t supposed to ride without me accompanying him.” Anger flooded Dora from head to toe. How dare he take one of her horses without her permission? She should have known the cocky Scotsman would do exactly what he pleased without so much as a by-your-leave or a care for her instructions. “If he isn’t back with my horse within the hour—”

“Miss Harper, Hannibal came back more than an hour ago.”

The blood drained from her face in a rush that made her head swim. Breathing deeply helped, and in moments her head cleared. “Has anything been done to recover him? He must have fallen off. His ankle must not have been strong enough.” She must pull her thoughts together. “Have all the men mount up and scour the estate.”

“That’s been attended to, Miss Harper.” The butler had a good head on his shoulders. “When Hannibal appeared, I sent James out on him to try to locate his lordship. Then Alfred came back just now, and I sent him off as well. Neither has returned yet.”

“Very good, Hanson.” At least something was being done. “There’s still light left. Perhaps I should take Gretchen out and join the search. I should think he wouldn’t be hard to find with three of us looking.”

“Begging your pardon, Miss Harper, but the light won’t last long.”

Hanson pointed at the dark clouds gathering above them. "There's a storm about to break. You'd get caught out in it for certain." The older man's face was lined with concern. "It would be best for you to remain here and be ready with whatever Lord Aberfoyle will require when he does arrive."

The Lord knew her butler made sense. The wind had risen tremendously and was tugging at her skirts this minute. It could pour down any second. Drat Lord Aberfoyle for making her feel responsible for him. And something more than responsible.

"I appreciate your advice, Hanson, but if he's been injured again, this storm could finish him. Please have—"

If both James and Alfred were out, there was no one to saddle Gretchen for her. She cursed her father all over again for not providing her with more than a skeleton staff. "I don't suppose you know how to saddle a horse, Hanson?"

"I'm sorry, miss, but I've been afraid of the beasts all my life." Hanson shook his head. "I never even learned to ride."

"Very well." Defeated at last, Dora marched inside. Fleeing up the stairs, she hurried to her room where Larkin awaited her with warm water for washing.

"I must dress quickly, Larkin. Lord Aberfoyle has not yet returned, and I fear the worst. I must go down directly and see everything prepared in the event James or Alfred find him and he's been injured again."

"Very good, Miss Harper." Larkin expertly stripped her then hurried into the dressing room. "Would you prefer the dark green muslin or the blue lutestring?"

"The dark green, please." It would show less dirt if she were called

upon to nurse Lord Aberfoyle.

Dora washed quickly and dried herself, glancing constantly out the window at the swaying trees. The storm threatened to break at any moment. She prayed James and Alfred would make it back before the deluge, bringing Lord Aberfoyle with them. She wasn't sure which she feared more: that his lordship had been badly hurt or recaptured by Lieutenant Scarlet.

As soon as Larkin had fastened her hair in a simple knot on top of her head, Dora sped downstairs. Once there, she paced from one room to the other, unable to sit still.

Hanson lit the lamps and at last approached her. "Miss Harper, Cook has informed me that dinner is ready. Shall I serve now, or will you wait for news?"

A clap of thunder made Dora flinch. She had no appetite, would likely have none until she was assured of her staff's and his lordship's safety. "Ask Cook to keep it warm please, Hanson."

A soft patter of raindrops against the windowpane swelled into a downpour that sheeted against the glass. Dora hurried to the front receiving room to peer out into the darkness. The drops struck the ground with such force the sound drowned out everything else. There was only Dora and the storm. Wind lashed the house with such fury Dora jumped back.

"Miss Harper?" Hanson had to raise his voice to be heard over the din. "James and Alfred have returned."

She whirled to face him, but the instant she saw his face, she knew what he would say.

"They couldn't find any sign of him. James rode as far as Mr. Hawkins's farm." The butler's visage was grave.

“Thank you, Hanson.” Dora returned to the window, her hope for Lord Aberfoyle’s safety dwindling. All she could pray for now was that he’d managed to find some place out of the storm and would return tomorrow morning. If he did not, she’d ride out with the men in search of him once more.

The door behind her opened again.

“What is it, Hanson?”

“I beg yer pardon for being late tae dinner, Miss Harper, but I was unfortunately detained.”

Chapter 10

Relief so strong it almost made her knees buckle swept through Dora. He was alive. Not injured, not recaptured, not fled to his uncle in London. Here. Unaware of what she was doing, she ran to the dripping Lord Aberfoyle, stopping short just before she flung her arms around him. “Thank God above you made it back here, my lord.”

His hair lay plastered to his head; his jacket, shirt, and breeches clung tightly to his frame, revealing every muscle from top to bottom. A sight she would not soon forget.

Her heart pounded with the wild beat of the storm surrounding them. “What happened to you?”

“Tis actually quite a story, Miss Harper.” He peeled the jacket away from his chest, and a rivulet of water streamed onto the floor. “Perhaps I can repair my appearance, and ye can listen tae the tale over a hot dinner?”

“Of course, my lord. You must be freezing.” She strode into the foyer. “Hanson!”

The butler appeared, looking more than a little startled at the sight of Lord Aberfoyle. “I beg your pardon, my lord. I didn’t hear you at the door.”

“I dinna knock, Hanson. I just came in tae get out o’ the wet.” He looked down at his thoroughly soaked body. “Although I seem tae have brought a good deal o’ it in with me. My apologies. I hope ye dinna hold it against me.”

“Not at all, my lord.”

“Hanson, call James, please.” Dora turned back to Lord Aberfoyle, her indignation rising now the crisis was over. “Why did you disobey my

orders this morning?”

For once, the Scotsman looked discomfited. “I beg yer pardon, Miss Harper, for that bit o’ mutiny, but I couldna cool my heels the whole morning when what I needed was tae see if I was able tae ride. The sooner I could ascertain that, the sooner I could be on my way and out from under yer feet.” Lord Aberfoyle ducked his head. “Ye must believe I dinna wish tae disrespect ye.” His head came up and he looked at her with contrition in his blue eyes. “Truly.”

Though it had been on the tip of her tongue to berate him for his ungentelemanly behavior, Dora could summon no words to that effect. His contrition was completely sincere. And since he’d returned the horse, he obviously had no intention of stealing it. Apparently, she’d misjudged him.

“Very well, then, my lord. I will accept your apology.” Somehow that seemed inadequate but would have to do. Gathering her dignity, she pulled herself up to her full height. “James can serve as your valet while you are here. He won’t be trained as such, but he will be a great help with your clothing. Especially the wet ones.” She looked expectantly at the earl. “Will you change and come down for dinner or do you prefer a tray in your room in light of all the excitement?”

“I think the former, if ye’ll wait for me.” He bowed. “A stirring tale needs tae be told while ’tis fresh in the mind.” Shooting her a quick grin, he left for his room, wet footprints trailing behind each squishing step down the corridor.

“Send James to his chamber, Hanson. Assist him if need be. Be sure there is sufficient toweling.” Dora hoped the cold rain wouldn’t result in the earl catching an ague. “And inform Cook that we’ll need supper hot and tasty

in about half an hour.”

“Yes, miss.” Hanson left at a trot while Dora sat on the sofa, her strength at an end.

What had happened to Lord Aberfoyle? A better question might be why she was so concerned for the man. She’d been on the brink of heading out into a bad storm in search of him, a foolish action that might have led to her own harm. What was this spell the man had cast on her?

Shrugging off the obvious answer, and gathering her strength, Dora rose and headed into the dining room, the table there set for the two of them. She settled in the chair at the head of the table, as was her custom, and waited for James. Of course, James wouldn’t wait at table until he’d finished with Lord Aberfoyle.

She rang for Hanson.

“Miss Harper?”

“Please bring me the wine.”

“Very good, miss.” The butler looked as though he approved of her command. He gave a quick nod, disappeared into the kitchen, and returned with a bottle of red wine. He poured, and Dora thankfully took a sip. “As James is now doing double duty as valet, can you please assist him at table, Hanson?”

“Of course.” He bowed and removed the wine decanter to the sideboard.

“Good evening, Miss Harper.”

Dora’s head came up so quickly her neck creaked.

Lord Aberfoyle stood in the doorway, dressed impeccably for dinner in more of Simon’s clothes, a suit of blue worsted wool with a cream

waistcoat that fit him better than Dora would have expected. His rich auburn hair had been dried and combed, making him look more than a little civilized.

He bowed and came forward, taking his seat at the opposite end from hers. “The storm seems tae have worn itself out.”

“Yes, thank goodness.” She dropped her napkin into her lap, not certain she wished to meet his gaze. “I was fearful you’d drowned for good this time.”

“Och, there were other dangers tae be considered.” He settled his napkin as James entered with the first course. “After that, a little rain was naught. May I have some wine, Hanson?”

“Of course, my lord.” The butler hurried forward clutching the bottle and poured.

“Thank ye.” Lord Aberfoyle took a long sip and sighed. “That was quite necessary.”

“You said you would tell me about your adventures.” She glanced at him and caught the rueful set to his lips. She returned her attention to her plate as she helped herself to roast beef in a rich gravy.

“I did, although the ride itself was uneventful. When I dismounted tae get a drink o’ water, however, things got...interesting.”

“Indeed.” She helped herself to the Yorkshire pudding, which smelled divine. “You were in the park?”

“Alas, nae.” Lord Aberfoyle loaded his plate with the beef and pudding when James presented them to him. “I fear I wandered a good deal further afield than I intended—all the way tae the burn where ye found me, in fact.”

Dora’s head shot up at that. “What were you thinking, my lord? The

soldiers could have been anywhere.” Her gaze met his, and something in his all-too-innocent eyes made her suspicious. “You came upon them, didn’t you?” Her appetite vanished. They could be on their way here to arrest him this very moment. “What happened?”

“Well,” he paused to spoon a generous portion of creamed vegetables onto his plate, “I did mean tae ride only in the park. However, as I was woolgathering, the horse took over our direction and the next thing, Hannibal had taken me across the road and intae a field. We rode down it for a bit then I recognized the wee burn. The horse wanted a drink, as did I.” The earl took up his wineglass, raised it in a salute to her, and drank deeply.

“Didn’t it occur to you that it was dangerous to be out in the open like that?” Picking at her food, Dora let out an exasperated sigh. “That if the soldiers came upon you, there’d be no place to hide?”

“I did have the presence o’ mind tae tether the animal on the opposite side, under the trees, before getting my drink.” Lord Aberfoyle seemed almost insulted at her accusation. Lord, but the man could be infuriating. “I was just in the process o’ lowering my stirrup tae mount when I heard the troop thundering down the bank.”

Heart racing, Dora couldn’t repress a shiver. This could have ended so badly for him.

“I kenned I’d never outrun them if they saw me, which they certainly would have, sae I sent the horse off, hoping he would go home, and burrowed under a thicket o’ sticker bushes. Then Scarlet and his men appeared.” He twirled the stem of his wineglass and stared frankly at her. “I expected I would be taken for sure.”

“But you were well hidden?”

“Apparently sae.” He set the glass down and lifted his arms, palms upward. “For here I am.” He picked his silverware back up, dug into the beef, and closed his eyes, a blissful look on his face.

“So then they rode on?” From his earlier words, Dora had supposed there would be more to the story.

“No’ exactly.” He eyed her then grinned. “One soldier, Sergeant Gates, heard me rustling under the bushes.”

“Good lord!” Dora sat straighter, unable to take her gaze from his face. Had he been frightened or merely determined to evade capture?

“Gates crossed the burn and ended up standing right over me. I truly thought he’d found me. I even grasped a stick, ready tae attack him and flee as best I could, though I kenned I wouldna get far.” Lord Aberfoyle leaned toward her, and Dora held her breath. “When he drew his pistol and cocked it, I thought I was going t’ die.”

Unable to utter a sound, Dora swallowed hard. Finally, she managed to ask, “Did he shoot you?”

“Nae. He shot at, and missed—at almost point-blank range, mind—a rabbit under the next bush over. Close enough tae make my ears ring.” That infectious grin was back. “That’s when Scarlet called him back and they mounted up and rode off the way I’d come. I waited a good hour tae make certain they weren’t going tae return then crawled out and started home. I never found Hannibal, sae I hope he returned.”

“He did.” With a sigh of relief, Dora picked up her wine and sipped avidly. Of course she’d known his encounter had turned out well, but the intensity with which he told it had quite swept her along, as though she didn’t know the happy ending. “I was still from home, but Hanson sent James out to

find you as soon as the horse appeared riderless. When Alfred arrived, he was sent out as well. I would have done so, but there was no one left to saddle Gretchen for me.”

“Tis a good thing ye couldnae, Miss Harper.” He stared at her over his all but empty plate. His face had sobered, his eyes darker than before, his brows in a determined frown. “Ye had nae business traipsing around in the storm looking for me. Especially when ye kenned there were soldiers on the prowl.”

“I would have been perfectly fine.”

“I am glad we dinna have tae find out the truth o’ that statement.” He finished off his wine and set the glass down with a clink. “One near miss with those soldiers was enough for one night.”

“With that I must agree, my lord. Although we will need to be on our guard tomorrow. I fear they will put in an appearance here at last. Lord Trevor said they had been to his estate today and would come here next.”

“I ken. I heard them discussing it when I was under the bush.” Lord Aberfoyle met her startled gaze. “I think this would be a good time tae formulate a plan for their visit, dinna ye?”

Of course the best way to assure Miss Harper’s safety would be for Finn to disappear. If he rode out tonight, he could likely make Leeds by first light, follow the lady’s idea and lose himself in the poorer section of the city. From there, he could write to his uncle for assistance.

A good plan, save for two complications. First, the storm had turned the roads to muck, making it more dangerous, nay treacherous, for a man to ride at night with no moon to light the way on unfamiliar roads. And second,

the two mile walk home, mostly in slippery wet boots, had aggravated his ankle. It had swollen when James had taken the boots off. Finn was now wearing someone's slippers that were too big but at least comfortable. Still, Finn doubted he'd be able to put the boots on again for a day or two at the least.

A third reason hovered in Finn's mind. He didn't want to leave Miss Harper here all alone. She had servants, of course, though precious few of them, but they would be no match for a determined intruder bent on mischief. After the chilling comment Scarlet had made, Finn knew the lady should not be alone on the estate. His presence here might deter anyone who attempted an attack. Unfortunately, to be effective as a deterrent, his presence must be known. And such a revelation would have disastrous effects for them both. He'd be recaptured immediately, and her reputation would be in shambles. When her parents heard of it, he'd probably be forced to marry her, and while he wasn't actually averse to the idea, he doubted Miss Harper would be particularly sanguine about it. Neither would her father, most likely. Oh, he had a title to be sure, and the earldom's properties were doing well enough, but to have his daughter forced into marriage with a Scotsman accused of treason would not be any Englishman's ideal.

"First, I need tae ask when yer parents can be expected tae return. While that would precipitate my leaving, it would help ye in the event the soldiers prove unruly."

"I doubt I will be in any danger from them, my lord." Miss Harper's face reddened.

"I think ye dinna ken the danger ye'll be in." She might not wish to discuss such unsavory ideas, but she had to understand how vulnerable she

actually was. “When will yer parents return?”

Miss Harper sighed. “I believe I may have exaggerated a bit about my parents, my lord.” She took her wineglass and drank until it was dry. “They are currently residing in Wiltshire, at my father’s primary residence. To my knowledge, they have no plans either to come here or send for me.”

All Finn could do was stare at her and attempt to quell the anger that licked through him. Why would anyone abandon their daughter in an obviously vulnerable and dangerous position on a remote estate in the Yorkshire countryside? It was unheard of in good social circles. A young woman’s reputation was paramount if she were to marry well. To be sent to the country without benefit of chaperone or protector or even a full complement of servants was reprehensible. “May I ask why they have taken such an exception tae yer company, Miss Harper?”

The lady examined her empty wine glass with intensity, careful to keep her gaze on the glassware and not him. “I think I had told you something of that earlier. Last year, I was betrothed to Lord Trevor. I had been promised to him since I was seven years old.” She paused and looked at him, as if awaiting a reaction she’d seen before.

Finn merely nodded. He’d heard of lasses as young as twelve marrying in Scotland, so to be betrothed at seven seemed no great stretch for the law to allow. “Did ye dislike the gentleman?”

Shooting him a curious glance, she shook her head. “I never even met him until early last year, just before my eighteenth birthday. My father had insisted the wedding could not take place until I reached an acceptable age.”

“Sae ye could see if the gentleman would suit?”

A sharp bark of laughter met his question. Miss Harper then signaled

James for more wine. “To keep this property—Bromley—as long as he possibly could for his own purposes. I was the bargaining chip, you see. Lord Trevor’s family had wanted it for generations. They bided their time until a son of their house was of a suitable age to be married to a daughter of ours. My father had married off my older sisters for other considerations before I was born. When I came along, the Trevors saw their chance. The current Lord Trevor was only ten years old when I arrived, so he was made to wait for me until I was old enough to marry him. We neither of us had any choice in the matter.”

“And this Lord Trevor was agreeable tae this scheme?” Finn’s hackles rose. The gentleman should have spoken up about such a business deal disguised as marriage to a child.

“The first time I met him, he seemed rather indifferent to the whole affair.” She shook her head. “I don’t think I even registered as a person to him. He wasn’t mean or rude, just disinterested. Like he’d thought only about acquiring the property and didn’t realize that the marriage would also bring him a living, breathing wife as well.” She smiled and looked away, as if lost in thought.

“He sounds like a loun, Miss Harper.” Good thing the man wasn’t present. It would not have ended well for Trevor.

“He is actually a very good and extremely kind man, my lord.” She continued to smile, and enthusiasm returned to her voice. “When we met again, last fall in London, he tried very hard to put me at my ease with him. It was as if he understood I was unsure of everything and tried to make the situation easy for me.” Sadness crept over Miss Harper’s face. “I suspect I’d have fallen madly in love with him, to my grief, had Fate not stepped in.”

“The current Lady Trevor?” Finn’s heart went out to the lovely woman across from him.

“Yes.” A pensive look came into her eyes. “I’m not certain where or when he met Violet, but I believe it was in London that autumn. He’d changed then from when I’d first met him. Much kinder and more attentive to me, more interested in seeing to my comfort when he came to Wiltshire in January, to prepare for the wedding—it had been postponed from the fall when my sister-in-law Judith had an accident. We were most distraught at her condition and, in hopes of her recovery, put the wedding off until after the holiday.”

“Ye and she were good friends?” Fascinated, as Miss Harper poured her heart out to him, Finn couldn’t help but prompt her for even more information. He wanted to know everything he could about this kind, caring woman who was carving out a small niche in his heart.

“Yes, we were. She has since recovered her faculties, I’m glad to say.” Her smile returned, like a blaze of light on a dark day. “She is now happily remarried to a childhood sweetheart. But please forgive me. I’m so sorry to have taken over the conversation with my sad little tale, my lord. I would not wish you to think me a bore.”

“Never would I deem ye boring, Miss Harper. Far from it.” He signaled James to bring the wine again. “Ye may leave the bottle.”

Miss Harper nodded to the footman. “That will be all for now, James, Hanson.”

“Very good, miss.” The servants disappeared into the kitchen, and Finn filled both their glasses, finishing the bottle.

“Noo, please continue, Miss Harper. I am all ears.” The wine was

delicious and had likely loosened his hostess's tongue. What better way to discover her than this?

"Well," Miss Harper sipped the fresh wine and continued, "Violet came to our house in Wiltshire as governess to my niece Anna. What we were unaware of was that ever since Judith's injury, my brother had been molesting the governesses. When he tried the same thing with Violet, Tris saved her quite spectacularly and challenged Simon to a duel for her honor. By then, I knew Tris was deeply in love with Violet. Anyone who saw the way he looked at her would have known. But he was betrothed to me and, as you know, could not jilt me without becoming a social pariah. So when he issued the challenge, I told Tris in front of my whole family, that under these circumstances, I must release him from his promise to marry me."

"Ye did that knowing yer own reputation would suffer?" That kind of sacrifice made him esteem her even more.

She turned a liquid gaze on him. "I would never have that look of love from him, my lord. Not if we were married a hundred years. Would you wish to live the rest of your life waiting and hoping for something you know you will never have? I wanted my freedom so I could perhaps find a gentleman who would feel for me what he feels for Violet."

If anyone deserved that, this woman did.

"Of course, my father was livid that I had thwarted his plans. After the duel..." She swallowed hard. "After my brother died of his wounds, my parents mourned him as though they only had the one child. My father sent Judith to her parents and me here as punishment for breaking the betrothal." With a sigh, she sat back, still holding her wineglass. "I suppose when I turn twenty-one, I can take my grandmother's inheritance and do what I wish."

She smiled brilliantly. “Buy my own property. Or travel, perhaps. Everyone says Italy is a marvel. I would enjoy experiencing their culture for a while.”

“I believe ye will, Miss Harper.” Finn had explored the cities and countryside of Italy on his Grand Tour four years ago. He wouldn’t mind at all seeing it once more...with a new companion, perhaps.

She leaned forward suddenly, reaching across the table and touching his hand. A shock crashed through his body, and he stiffened all over. “Won’t you please call me Dora? I feel as though we know one another too well now to stand on ceremony.”

The shock turned into a warmth that had nothing to do with the wine he’d drunk. “I would be honored t’ dae sae, Dora. If ye will call me Finn. All my friends dae.” His family as well.

“Wonderful, Finn.” She beamed at him, her cheeks prettily pink. “This is a good start for us if my plan is to succeed.”

“What plan?” Dora already had a way of catching him off guard.

“My plan to thwart the soldiers when they arrive tomorrow.”

Chapter 11

“What’s gotten into you this morning, Miss Harper?”

Dora turned this way and that before her mirror as Larkin tried to put the finishing touches on her coiffure.

“If you keep fidgeting like this, you’ll never be ready to go downstairs.” The harried maid had hairpins in her mouth and the curling iron in her hands. “I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“Forgive me, Larkin.” Dora turned toward the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of a column of soldiers in the driveway. As she twisted, she pulled her hair out of the tongs yet again.

“Miss Harper!” The maid spat the pins out, and they pattered onto the carpet. “You must hold still, or your hair will be a fright on this side.” She knelt to retrieve the pins.

“I can’t help it, Larkin. So much depends on this morning.” If the soldiers decided to come this morning. They might not arrive until afternoon, and then she’d be fit only for a room in Bedlam. Taking advantage of Larkin’s inattention, Dora rose and strode to the window.

The rain had washed the whole of the outdoors, the remaining droplets making everything sparkle in the morning sun. If only the soldiers would put in an appearance, they could get on with the rest of the day’s work, which would include Finn writing that letter to his uncle.

Finn. She liked the sound of that. It suited him so much better than the rather staid Phineas. She also liked that she’d been invited to call him by the name his friends used. It made her feel more of a companion to him, rather than simply an acquaintance.

Still no soldiers.

“Miss Harper.” Larkin had reheated the tongs and held them up. Best to yield to the inevitable. She wanted to look well for the little subterfuge she had planned.

Dora went back to her chair and patiently counted to two hundred as Larkin plied the tongs to make her hair curl in pleasing ringlets beside her cheeks. “Is it done yet?”

“Just a moment.” Carefully, Larkin began to unwind the tongs.

At a rap on the door, Dora tried to bound up, but the maid pushed her back down.

“Miss Harper, if you move, these tongs could burn the hair right off your head.” The maid’s voice was sharp as she continued to unwind the curl. “Now stay still. I’m all but done.”

Resigned, Dora sat as still as she possibly could, though she twitched with impatience to leave. “Come in.”

The door opened and there stood Finn, looking splendid once more in her brother’s clothing, his eyes shining, grinning for all he was worth. “Good morning, Miss Harper. How are ye this fine day?”

Heart suddenly aflutter, Dora jumped to her feet just as Larkin removed the tongs from the final curl. “Finn.” She glanced at the maid. Perhaps a more formal address was called for whilst they were in her bedchamber. “Er, Lord Aberfoyle. What are you doing here? Is there something wrong?” She gasped. “Have the soldiers arrived?”

“Nae, dinna fash yerself. I dinna think they would be here sae early.” He shifted uncomfortably, one hand hidden behind his back. “’Tis something else entirely. And, well, it came tae my attention after I retired last evening,

that I had no' properly apologized for my behavior yesterday."

"Your behavior?" Dora frowned.

"Disobeying yer order no' tae ride wi'out yer presence. I am truly sorry tae have done it, especially as it worried ye sae."

Somehow, in all their planning for the soldiers' inevitable visit last night, she'd quite forgotten that piece of impertinence. She straightened, her smile dimming. "Well, I thank you for making a formal apology for conduct that could have cost you your life, my lord. Consider your apology accepted."

"Will ye also accept this small token o' my appreciation for all ye've done for me?" He withdrew his hand from behind his back, revealing a sizeable bouquet of wildflowers, still wet with morning dew. "I dinna think it proper tae pick the flowers in yer formal garden, sae I went out early this morning tae gather some o' the ones I had seen at the end o' yer driveway yesterday."

Any sternness she might have harbored vanished as Dora's heart melted. "What a thoughtful gesture, Lord Aberfoyle." She reached out to take the bouquet from his hand but during that simple action, as they tried not to drop the flowers, their fingers became intertwined. A wave of heat overtook Dora as his warm hand clutched at hers. She gasped then laughed as they struggled to contain the stems. "There, I've got them. No, catch that one."

Finn stooped to grasp the single flower that had escaped them then straightened and offered the bloom to her. "No' bad for a man with all thumbs this morning. I dropped them more than once when I was picking them."

Dora took it and buried her face in the sweet blooms to hide her pink cheeks. With everything they must think about this morning, he was terribly sweet to go to the time and trouble to walk all the way down the driveway...

“Wait.” She pulled her face from the bouquet, her frown returning. “You were out on the roadside this morning? When we were all but assured that the soldiers are coming here today? Are you mad? What if they had come upon you? You’d have been arrested and whisked off with them and we’d have been none the wiser.”

“Miss Harper, ye worry for nothing.” He smirked at her. “The wee gomerels would never be awake that time o’ day, much less out and about. I was in nae more danger then than I am now.”

That remained to be seen. “Please put these in water, Larkin.” Unceremoniously, Dora handed the bouquet to her maid. “And see that Lord Aberfoyle finds his way back to his chamber and is ready to play his part. He seems to have a habit of straying when it is most inconvenient.”

“Yes, miss.” Larkin took the flowers in both hands then eyed Finn. “This way, my lord, although I think you know the way.”

“Aye, I dae.” Shooting a final grin at Dora, Finn went out the door, Larkin right behind him.

Stamping her foot in frustration—which did no good at all for her soft slippers made no satisfying thump on the thick carpet—Dora marched to the door and pushed it closed with a sharp bang. Soothed somewhat, she returned to her dressing table and sat, bewildered by the conflicting feelings Lord Aberfoyle seemed to always bring out in her.

His gesture with the flowers was incredibly sweet and in other circumstances would have touched her deeply. Had done so, in fact, until it became evident how foolhardy Finn had been in doing it. As he himself had said, he’d been arrested for being a fool, so such behavior was apparently not unusual for the man. A dangerous flaw in his character in his present situation,

and one she would not tolerate for long. Finn's appeal had slipped several notches.

A knock on the door startled her out of her gloomy reverie. "Come."

The door opened on Hanson. "Miss Harper, a Lieutenant Scarlet and five soldiers are here. I have put them in the front receiving room."

Dora catapulted to her feet. "Find Larkin. Tell her to put on her white apron and go to the viscount's apartment immediately. Then tell them I will be down directly."

The butler hurried away, and Dora took one final look in the mirror. She'd do for the role she needed to play now. She grabbed up her cream shawl, embroidered with multicolored flowers that complemented her deep turquoise print gown, and headed for Finn's room.

At her knock, a muffled voice called, "Come in."

The drapes had not been drawn, giving the room a dim, dungeon-like quality, with no direct light. In the massive bed rested a white-clad figure, an old-fashioned nightcap pulled down over his gray hair. Eyes closed, the figure lay back on the pillows.

"Dora, Dora? You've forgotten m' breakfast, daughter." His voice was high and squeaky, for all the world like an elderly gentleman. Not a hint of his Scottish accent. "Dora?" Finn opened one eye. "Was that convincing enough?" he said in his own voice.

"Lord." He would be the death of her. "They are downstairs in the receiving room." He didn't seem frightened at all by what they were about to attempt. He'd better be serious about it, though. She had no idea her plan would work. "You have to behave like Mr. Harper, an elderly gentleman who is ill. We talked about this last night."

“We did, but I thought I should try tae make the old man as true tae form as possible. I’m impersonating my uncle, ye ken. His voice is high as any woman’s.”

“Please, Finn. Larkin should be here any minute. Just remember to cough and moan loudly, but not too often. I hope they don’t come in, but if they do...” She took in the old nightshirt that belonged to her father, the nightcap over one of Father’s wigs, and for a last touch, she pushed the chamber pot out from under the bed a trifle more. It hadn’t been emptied from the night before, per her instructions. “If they do, I think they will believe you are my father.”

“Then ye go play yer part and I shall take care o’ mine.” He gazed at her, confidence in his eyes.

Straightening her shoulders, Dora nodded and strode from the room. She couldn’t bear to think of what would happen should their little scheme go awry.

Entering the receiving room, she smiled engagingly at the lieutenant, a taller man than she’d expected, with dark blond hair and cold gray eyes that assessed her as quickly as she had him. “Lieutenant Scarlet?” She curtsied as prettily as she knew how. “My butler said you wished to see me? About the escaped prisoner, I suspect.”

“At your service, Miss Harper.” Scarlet bowed, his lips in a tight line. “You have heard of our quest in the neighborhood then?”

“Yes, lieutenant. From several sources, including Lord Trevor. His wife and I are old friends, so when I visited her yesterday, he chanced to tell me of your call on them.” It was always best to carry the fight into the enemy’s court. “So you have not found the fugitive yet?”

“No, Miss Harper.” The lieutenant nodded toward his men. “We’ve been searching for him around here for the last four days and seen nothing of him. I begin to believe he’s received help from someone in the neighborhood.” The officer peered directly into her face in a blatant attempt to intimidate her. “Otherwise, how could he have avoided us so long?”

“How indeed, lieutenant.” Dora cocked her head, trying not to think of the lieutenant’s cruelty to Finn. “Do you think perhaps he’s moved on to another place? I’d think an escaped prisoner would want to run as fast and as far as possible to elude capture.”

“He may have done, Miss Harper, but I deemed it necessary to scour the neighborhood thoroughly to assure myself he has gone.” Scarlet nodded at her, a slight smile on his lips. “We know he’s now afoot instead of on horseback. The horse he stole during his escape turned up just north of here. Somehow, the prisoner lost him, which slowed him down. That is why I wanted to do a thorough search of every property hereabouts.” He eyed Dora, and she braced herself for the request that would come. “Including this one, Miss Harper.”

“Of course, Lieutenant Scarlet. You may search the barn and outhouses. The only people on the property are the servants, myself, and my father.” That had come out naturally, thank goodness.

“Your father, you say?” Scarlet paused, staring at her with narrowed eyes. “I was given to understand from some of the locals that your father was from home. If he is here, why has he not come down to meet with me instead of sending his daughter?”

“Because he is ill and in bed, lieutenant. My servants have been nursing him for nigh on a week.” Dora met the man’s gaze and stared him

down. "I pray that when your men search the house, they will do it quietly. My father needs his rest."

"Very good, Miss Harper." He turned to the troops, who had been shifting from one leg to the other ever since she mentioned an illness. "Gates, Lawson, take the outbuildings. Johnson, search outside around the house and gardens." He nodded to two younger soldiers. "Parker and Henderson, you'll search the house. Parker, the ground floor, Henderson, the first. I'll take the second floor."

"I will accompany you, lieutenant. I was going there before you were announced, as that is where my father's room is." She started to the door and turned into the corridor.

There was a muted conversation among the troops then they emerged one by one from the receiving room and headed off to their assigned tasks. Lieutenant Scarlet was the last. He glanced at her. "If you will be so kind as to lead the way, Miss Harper?"

"Of course." Gathering her skirts, Dora strode briskly toward the main staircase, followed by Scarlet and Henderson. They climbed the stairs in silence until they reached the first floor.

"Right, Henderson, check each room thoroughly. Look in every crack and crevice large enough for a man to squeeze into."

"Yes, sir." The man saluted Scarlet.

"Should he require assistance, Lieutenant Scarlet, he may call one of the servants." She'd already alerted Sally to listen if he called out, and where to take him.

"You hear that, Henderson?"

The soldier nodded then turned down the right corridor and opened

the first door on the left.

Dora had nothing to fear on the first floor. It was mainly guest bedrooms unused since the last time the entire family had met together five years before.

She and the lieutenant continued up the stairs, the silence between them becoming more and more pronounced. “Are we the final house you’ve searched in the area?”

“Yes, save for one more tenant house at the farthest edge of the estate to the south. We will stop there as we head to Thirsk.”

“That will be Mr. Massingill’s farm. He should be no trouble at all. I hope all my father’s tenants have given you nothing but cooperation.” They reached the landing for the second floor, and Dora prayed for strength.

“They have, Miss Harper. We have been given easy access to every house, barn, stable, garden, and outbuilding in the area. We have met with little resistance.” He turned to her, his face set in pleasant lines. “An unusually cooperative community, in fact.”

“I have never known any of my father’s tenants to be disrespectful of authority, lieutenant. I would think you’d be glad of that.” Dora paused before heading down the left corridor, the one that held her own room and Larkin’s.

“It has been refreshing, I grant you, but hardly our usual reception.” The lieutenant’s gaze bored into her. “And the unusual always bodes ill for someone.”

“Perhaps the people hereabouts are happy to have you trying to catch this prisoner. They will feel safer when you do.” She opened the first door, an unused bedroom next door to her own. “Here’s the first of a series of sleeping chambers on this floor. They are mostly disused in recent years. Our family

has dwindled.”

“Thank you, Miss Harper.” Scarlet drew his pistol and entered.

Dora stood out in the corridor, her heart pounding even though there was nothing in the room for Scarlet to find. Still, the sight of the pistol had frightened her.

The lieutenant was quick. He opened the wardrobe, looked under the bed, and behind the painted screen that served as a dressing room for the chamber. He returned to the corridor shortly and nodded. “Can I see the next one, please?”

Room succeeded room as they continued to the end and started back. “This is my chamber, lieutenant.” Her pulse quickening,, she opened the door and entered before him. “There are few places to conceal a man here, I’m afraid.”

“I can see that, Miss Harper.” He went immediately to the door leading to the dressing room, but it had nothing save her gowns hanging there. As quickly, he exited the room and proceeded to check the wardrobe, under the bed, behind the massive chest-on-chest. At last, he seemed satisfied. “No one here.”

“Very well, lieutenant. The next room belongs to my lady’s maid, Larkin.” Dora opened the door. Her mother had always insisted her lady’s maids sleep near her, but not too near. Hence a small chamber beside her own, but with no connecting door. Dora had always wondered why her mother’s apartment was on the opposite corridor from the viscount’s apartments, but of course had never blatantly asked. Her older sisters had laughed and said their bedrooms certainly connected to their husbands’ apartments, which made Dora even more curious. She assumed that veil would be lifted once she

married. If she ever married.

Lieutenant Scarlet had finished with Larkin's small room while Dora had been wondering about her parents' sleeping arrangements, so they headed toward the other set of rooms, including the viscount's apartments. Now was the time to test her courage. "My father's chamber is just there, on the left. He hasn't left it since he arrived. Let me see if he is sleeping." She knocked quietly and called, "Papa? Larkin? May I come in? I have a visitor."

There was a moment of silence then a fit of coughing erupted, loud and long.

Scarlet sent a suspicious look at her. "How long has your father been sick?"

"Not a week yet. The surgeon has been out twice, but he is not as optimistic as I would like." Dora knocked again. "Papa, are you all right? We are coming in for just a few minutes." She opened the door and entered. Larkin sat at the side of the bed, a wet handkerchief pressed to the forehead of the figure in the bed. He was groaning and moaning. The room smelled of urine and worse. "Papa, this is Lieutenant Scarlet. He is looking for a man who ran away."

Another fit of coughing commenced. Larkin pressed a handkerchief to his mouth and when she took it away, the rag was bloody.

"Oh, dear." Dora turned to Scarlet, trying to look gravely concerned for him. "I forgot to ask, lieutenant, if you've had the smallpox variolation?"

"Smallpox?" Scarlet jumped out of the room as though he'd been fired from a cannon. "Why the bloody hell didn't you say your father had smallpox?"

"Mr. Cardrew isn't positive, you see." She glanced at the figure in the

bed, still moaning. “He says there should be a rash of little red dots all over him by this time if it’s really the smallpox. But he hasn’t gotten them yet, so —”

“He does now, Miss Harper.” Larkin spoke up, right on cue. “I noticed when I was bathing him. Look.” Larkin pulled up the nightshirt sleeve to reveal an arm peppered with little red dots.

“Oh, Papa,” Dora whispered, her hand going to her mouth. “I’m so sorry. I’ll have the surgeon fetched at once. Stay with him please, Larkin.” She rushed out of the room and shut the door. “Lieutenant Scarlet, please forgive me for not thinking to ask you sooner. You were not in the room very long, so I doubt you are in any danger. Here are the other rooms.” She strode to first one then the other empty chambers and threw the doors open. “Please look quickly so I may send for Mr. Cardrew.”

Face like last night’s thunderclouds, Scarlet made cursory searches of the two rooms then joined her in the corridor. By that time, Dora had fished out her handkerchief and was applying it to her eyes. “Are you done now, lieutenant? Then let us hurry.” With a sob, Dora rushed down the corridor to the staircase. Not surprisingly, Scarlet kept pace with her.

When they arrived at the ground floor, Dora poked her head into the servant’s hall and called for Hanson, who appeared instantly. “Hanson, my father has taken a turn for the worse. Please send Alfred to fetch the surgeon. Tell him to hurry.”

“Very good, Miss Harper.” The butler nodded and disappeared back into the hall.

“I am so sorry, again, lieutenant, if I’ve caused you any worry.” She looked about. “I truly do not think you are in any danger. Are your men

assembled outside? Probably the best thing, given the circumstances. Is there anything else I can help you with?" She gave Scarlet her best distracted damsel-in-distress look, something she'd perfected with Judith's help for dealing with her real father.

"No, Miss Harper. I will confer with my men, but if they'd found anything suspicious, they'd have come to me at once." He bowed and stepped back. "Good day." With a quick about-face, he whirled around and strode off the porch with the speed of a horse put to the spurs.

He called out, "Mount," sprang into his saddle, and gathered the reins. The other men followed suit, and moments later, the troop was cantering down the driveway without as much as a glance backward.

Hanson joined her on the steps. "Shall I tell Alfred not to go for Mr. Cardrew, Miss Harper?"

"No, he must go. If Lieutenant Scarlet is one wit suspicious, he may wait down the road to see if Alfred actually does go for the man." She wouldn't put that past the lieutenant. "When Mr. Cardrew arrives, he can examine Lord Aberfoyle's ankle and make certain it wasn't further injured last evening."

"Of course, Miss Harper." Hanson turned to go then stopped. "If I may, miss, I think your scheme was wonderful."

"Thank you, Hanson." Dora's heart was filled with happiness, although she wouldn't truly know joy until she was certain Scarlet had left the vicinity of Bromley for good. Still, she must go upstairs and share the good news with Finn.

She fairly flew up the steps then ran, her slippers pattering on the carpet, to the viscount's apartments. Not stopping to knock, she opened the

door to find Larkin still patting Finn's face with the wet handkerchief.

Finn lay unmoving in the bed, her father's longest nightcap pulled over his head, down almost to his nose so his eyes could not be seen. The gray curls of her father's wig were bunched around his face, hiding it further. From beneath all that disguise came a hacking sound as though he was coughing up his insides.

"Finn? Are you all right?" Dora took a tentative step toward the bed. Had he been sick all along with some lung disease she didn't know about?

At the sound of her voice, he sat straight up in the bed, plucking both wig and nightcap from his head and tossing them to the end of the bed. "Thank Christ! Those things felt like an inferno on top o' my head." He blinked at her and rubbed the spot, making all his hair stand on end. He looked younger and more boyish than ever when he asked, "Can we please have breakfast noo?"

Chapter 12

“Please tell Mrs. McComber these bannocks are a delight.” Finn finished the last of his second one, amazed at the light, airy texture. The bannocks he had at home were much denser, made of oatmeal by Mrs. MacNiven, who’d been his family’s cook since before he was born. Maybe he could ask Mrs. McComber for the recipe to take back to Aberfoyle. Not that he thought his cook would use it, but it would be good to have, just in case.

“I’ll be sure to pass that along.” Sitting across from him, Dora, in her brightly embroidered gown, smiled and sipped her coffee.

A sight he could get used to each morning.

“Sae we think Lieutenant Scarlet was sae afraid o’ the smallpox he dinna look hard enough at my arm tae notice it wisna an old man’s?”

Dora laughed, and the sound made him smile. “I think he heard your coughing, took one look at all the red spots on your arm, and didn’t care to look any further.” She industriously buttered a piece of toast. “How on earth did Larkin manage to fill your arm with them so quickly?” She bit into the toast with relish.

“Genius, I’d call it.” Finn began on the poached eggs, which he’d laid lovingly on two pieces of toast. “She took one o’ yer hair combs and dipped the teeth in yer rouge pot then applied it t’ my arm. She’d just started tae put some on my face when ye knocked on the door.” The eggs were soft and creamy, so delicious he couldn’t eat them slowly. He supposed he was making up for the past week when he’d been nearly starving. At the thought of those hungry, uncomfortable days, he took a huge forkful of ham and devoured it.

“My heart was in my throat the whole time.”

"I couldna tell that a'tall. Ye sounded sae natural when ye asked the lieutenant if he'd had the..."

"Variolation." They said the word together, and Finn chuckled.

"I only wish you could have seen his face." Dora shook her head, her eyes sparkling. "It must have turned two shades whiter. He looked like someone had put leeches on him."

"Ugh." Finn shuddered. "I'd no' wish those nasty wee beasties on anyone." He caught Dora's gaze. "Well, perhaps, I'd make an exception for the lieutenant."

"I don't think I'd blame you for that." Dora's gaze rested directly on his face. Perhaps even lingering on his lips? "Lieutenant Scarlet deserves whatever he might get for his foul treatment of you." Slowly, almost deliberately, she put her cup back into its saucer. "But now we have run that gauntlet successfully, what are your plans?"

"The same as they have always been. I must go tae London, find my uncle, and ask him tae help me have these charges dismissed." Another meal or two like this one and he'd actually be ready to leave. Ready but not eager.

"Will you have Lieutenant Scarlet cashiered for his persecution of you?" Her voice was completely even, making it impossible to ascertain if she favored that idea or not.

"Honestly, I have no' thought about that." Finn sat back and sipped his tea. He truly had been so involved in escaping Scarlet he'd had no time to think about what, if any, retribution he would seek when he was no longer a wanted man. "Even if I understand his motives, he'd nae right tae beat me, nor threaten me with dire bodily harm, just because I wore the kilt. I am a peer o' the realm and should no' have been treated this way. I ken he should pay

for that misdeed, but I have nae idea what might be appropriate.” Finn shrugged. The last thing he wished to think about, when sitting across the table from a lovely lady, was Lieutenant Scarlet. “I will consult with my uncle when I get tae London. He may have an idea o’ what punishment the lieutenant deserves for that indignity.”

“You are a man of restraint, my lord.” Dora smiled at him, sending warmth through him. “That speaks well of your character. Perhaps your uncle *would* have a better knowledge of possible disciplinary actions that could be brought against Lieutenant Scarlet.” To his consternation, she met his gaze and held it. “With regards to your uncle, I was wondering if it might be easier and more prudent to write to him from here and explain your predicament. You could ask him to either come and transport you to London, or to undertake to resolve the issue in London and send word to you when it has been settled.”

Finn set his teacup down, suddenly uncertain what she was suggesting. “It would certainly be a boon no’ tae have t’ travel t’ London with an injured ankle, but I willna ken if my uncle needs me there until he tells me sae.”

“But that could be via correspondence as well as in his presence, couldn’t it?” Her eyes beseeched him. “Then you could remain at Bromley and continue to convalesce here until you hear from your uncle. Wouldn’t that be the better plan, Finn?”

“Tis a very generous offer, Dora.” It had, in fact, caught Finn completely by surprise.

He’d have thought she’d wish to be rid of him immediately and try to forget all the trouble he’d caused her. Instead, she wished him to remain here

with her. A few reasons she might have done this came to mind immediately. One was simple Christian charity, but Dora had shown no overt religious tendencies around him so far. The other, which he quite wished to believe, was that she was coming to enjoy his company. Perhaps even be fond of him.

His throat dried when he considered that possibility. The woman was self-assured, quick-witted, and a damn fine strategist. She'd put together the campaign against Lieutenant Scarlet quickly and efficiently and executed it without flaw. And she was very comely into the bargain. If he took her up on her proposal, he'd be much safer than if he were back out on the road, subject to the elements and Scarlet's men. True, harboring him could bring down the considerable wrath of Scarlet, but the lieutenant had no reason to search the house again. And if he stayed, he'd have the opportunity to become better acquainted with Dora, something he longed to do. What he'd already learned about her had him fascinated. Just think what else he might uncover? Still, he should be cautious. "Sae generous I have tae wonder why ye're making it."

She blinked, her eyes widening. "What...what do you mean?"

"Ye've been more than kind tae rescue me from the burn. Ye've taken me intae yer home, fed and clothed me even though I have nae claim on ye. Why would ye wish tae extend that hospitality tae a total stranger?"

Her cheeks turned a most becoming shade of red, and she tossed her napkin on the table and rose, bringing him to his feet. "I was always taught to be charitable to those in need. When I discovered you, Finn, you were just that—in need of rescue. You are in somewhat better circumstances now, however, I believe you still require succor." She made a little gesture with her hands, part shrug, part entreaty. "I simply wish to help you." Her gaze met his with an intense longing that struck him to his soul. "You have kind eyes."

“Kind eyes?”

She nodded then disappeared through the doorway in a blur of bright fabric.

Dropping back down into his chair, Finn stared at the empty seat across from him, still seeing Dora’s beautiful face as it had been only moments ago. The world had just tilted on its axis. The longing he’d seen in her eyes—had it been for him?

With hands shaking so hard she had to grip her skirts to still them, Dora ran down the corridor, not knowing where she was going, just that she must get away from Finn. She’d revealed too much in those final moments before she’d escaped the room. She needed to find a quiet place to calm herself and decide how much Finn might have guessed about her.

The library was always deserted. She darted in and closed the door, panting with exertion and fear.

Why had she looked at him like that?

She paced the perimeter of the library, past the neat shelves of dusty books in an attempt to soothe herself and contemplate what to do next. She likely couldn’t do either. The excitement of the morning, of deceiving Lieutenant Scarlet, and laughing about it afterward, had created a bond of sorts between her and Finn, the kind shared when one goes through an ordeal and comes out the other side unscathed.

That was how she and Judith had become friends. Violet as well. Those acquaintanceships had blossomed into true friendships. And while the encounter with the lieutenant seemed to have brought her closer to Finn, what she wanted from him, she’d realized at breakfast, was something more.

After visiting Violet and Tris, she'd come to the reluctant realization that she was more than ready for the kind of intimacy her friends shared. Seeing their perfect happiness had made her wish with all her heart for a husband and children. A family of her own. The camaraderie that had developed between her and Finn in the brief time they'd shared made her long to deepen it.

Dora's pacing slowed, and she dropped into the tall leather chair behind the library table.

She hadn't had any intention of liking the rough-looking Scotsman she'd fished out of the stream day before yesterday. He'd been rude and more than a bit of trouble for her. Just look at his actions yesterday, disobeying her orders, riding out where she'd told him not to go, and then running into the soldiers and almost being caught again. Or shot. Dora gripped the chair arms, thinking how close he'd come to being killed. A wilder and more undisciplined man she'd never met. She should have turned him out of the house for his insolence.

But she could no more have done that than she could swim to China. When he'd told her about the cruelty he'd suffered because of his arrest, even when she didn't quite believe it all, something about him had tugged at her heart. His gallant gesture of offering to help her up onto Gretchen and escape while he stayed behind, possibly to face the soldiers alone, spoke more eloquently about him than anything he'd said. Surprisingly, he'd offered her solace when she'd told him about her situation with Tris and her reputation when many would simply have shunned her.

And he did have very kind eyes.

These might not be the qualities a young woman was supposed to

look for when selecting a husband, but they were enough for her. She was so tired of being alone. She wanted someone to love—someone who would love her. And she'd thought, if only for a moment at breakfast, that he could love her. If only her qualities could be enough for him.

It was foolish, given her circumstances, to think Finn, or any gentleman, would look on her with affection or desire, yet the hope for this wouldn't die. Of course, Tris had never thought of her that way. After he married Violet, he acted toward Dora as an elder brother would: protective. Never as a lover. Now, strange as it might seem given they butted heads so often, she wished with all her might that Finn would see her as pleasing, a woman who could be an eligible match for him. The question was, would he see only her sullied reputation and not who she really was? She'd known well the consequences of breaking her betrothal, and yet she could have done nothing different.

Dora laid her head down on the polished teak table, its smooth surface cool beneath her cheek. What must she do? She'd offered Finn sanctuary here at Bromley both to give him succor and respite from Lieutenant Scarlet's pursuit, but also to gain time for them to get to know each other better. They were not in the usual social circumstances where they could meet at entertainments and balls and pursue a courtship the normal way. But if he stayed here, they could talk and dine together for a few days at least. Out of that, something substantial might grow.

With Violet and Tris here in Yorkshire, she could, perhaps, meet other eligible gentlemen who might suit her. Could have done, that was, had Finn not appeared in her life.

Now what she really wished to do was wait and see if Finn's regard

for her deepened. Something inside her, a voice she yearned to listen to, said she should give her budding friendship with Finn the opportunity to grow into more. Especially as she had developed this sudden *tendre* for the Scotsman. One could not force the heart where it did not wish to go. If *his* wished to go elsewhere, however, then she would have to accept that and move on as well.

That he'd not immediately agreed to stay had somewhat dashed her hopes, but there was still a chance he would choose to remain simply to continue recuperating until he was well enough to go to his uncle. Until then, with him close to her, she had a chance to win his affection, didn't she? If only she knew what to do next. Why had her older sisters or her mother never explained how to encourage a man's attentions?

Ask Violet.

The words popped into her head as if spoken by a kind angel.

The one person who could tell her how to make herself attractive to a man. If Violet had been able to make Tris the besotted and devoted husband he was, she would certainly have advice on how Dora could make herself more appealing to Finn.

Automatically, she reached for ink, paper, and pens, all close at hand on the library table. She'd write to her friend immediately and ask to call on her regarding a very important matter. Violet wouldn't fail her. Dora would have her happy ever after, just like in the fairy tales.

With a smile, she mended the pen, dipped it in the silver ink well, and began to write.

Chapter 13

“My dear, what is wrong?” Violet met her at the door to the drawing room, arms outstretched.

Dora went into them without hesitation. “Oh, Violet, I didn’t know what else to do. Who else I could turn to.”

“Come, sit down.” Arm around Dora’s shoulders, Violet led her to the same chaise as before, but this time sat beside her, holding her hand. “I’ve already rung for tea. Your note was most alarming, my dear. There was such urgency in the pen strokes I was beside myself wondering what had happened. Now tell me what has upset you so.”

Looking into Violet’s worried face, Dora had sudden grave doubts about the wisdom of confessing to her friend. Once she told Violet about Finn, and how he came to be living under her roof, Dora feared the first thing she would do was call for Tris. Yet what else could she do if she wanted guidance in wooing Lord Aberfoyle? This was not the time to be squeamish.

“It’s a gentleman, Violet. A gentleman I wish to have a better acquaintance with.”

“Indeed, my dear, you astonish me.” Her friend sat back on the chaise, looking at Dora as though she’d never seen her before. “You said nothing of this yesterday. Who is he? Where did you meet him, and when? The way you spoke, I believed you in need of the company of gentlemen. Are you saying this is not the case? That you have found a gentleman you believe you can love?”

“I do believe I have, Violet.” Lord, but it felt so good to say that aloud to someone. “He is a gentleman I have little acquaintance with. However, I

think we may indeed suit. We seem to rub along together well. He's a kind, brave soul who is currently seeking to right a wrong done to him."

Violet's brows took a downward turn. "And when did you meet this gentleman, Dora?"

"The day before yesterday. Out on the property while I was riding." Of course Violet would want to know all the details of their meeting.

"Is he staying on a neighboring estate, then?" The concern had lifted, but Dora feared that reprieve would be brief.

"No, not with one of the neighbors. With me."

"With you?" Violet cocked her head, frowning deeply. "What do you mean?"

"The gentleman is currently residing beneath my roof at Bromley." In for a penny... "He's the man Lieutenant Scarlet and his men are looking for."

The stunned look on Violet's face would have been comical had Dora not feared she would actually faint. The blood drained from her cheeks and her mouth dropped open. Frantically, Dora patted Violet's wrists. "Violet. Violet. Breathe, my dear, or I shall be forced to use the smelling salts."

Finally, her friend gasped in a breath and clutched her throat. "Dora! Dear lord, you cannot mean it." She struggled to rise. "I must summon Tristan. He will know what to do."

"What will Tris know to do?"

Dora jerked upright at the sight of Lord Trevor standing in the doorway, dressed in his elegant riding clothes—blue jacket and buckskin breeches—smiling as he took them both in.

"Oh, Tris." Violet rose and grasped her husband's hand. "Dora has just told me—" Her gaze swung back to Dora.

All she could do was stare at her friend and hold her breath.

“Dora told you what, my love?” Tris’s gaze darted from his wife to Dora, the inquisitive rise in his eyebrows tinged with concern.

“That she has found a gentleman she is becoming fond of.” Violet’s stare said she’d bought Dora some time, nothing more. Violet did not wish to lie to Tris, and in her heart, Dora could not blame her for that.

“Have you, Dora?” Tris smiled broadly and leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Is he someone of our acquaintance here in Yorkshire? Violet gave me to believe you’d been all but entombed up here for the past months. Who have you come to admire?”

“I am certain he is not known to you, Tris.” Her mind raced. How could she tell Tris the truth without him bringing the wrath of God down on her head or turning Finn in to Scarlet? “I only met him myself the other day. An earl, somewhat younger than you.” Perhaps she could smooth the path a little by giving all Finn’s accolades. “A little over my age. You may have met his uncle who sits in Parliament, although I confess, I cannot remember the gentleman’s name.”

“There are rather a lot of members in Lords, Dora. I may well have met the gentleman but without a name, I won’t be able to tell you.” Tris settled himself beside Violet, still holding her hand. “Has the earl not taken his place there yet? Or is his father still alive?”

“No.” Could she bring Finn’s father up safely? “He died at the Battle of Prestonpans in ’45. Fighting for the British.”

“Well, of course he’d be fighting for England.” Tris’s smile slowly faded. “Why would you specify that, may I ask? Who else would he be fighting for? The Scots?”

“Lord Aberfoyle fought and died for the British crown, despite the fact that he was Scottish by birth.” Now she was at the crux. “His son, the current Lord Aberfoyle, is also Scottish.”

“Aberfoyle?” Tris’s frown had almost reached his nose. “I am not acquainted with any Lord Aberfoyle in the neighborhood. How did you meet him?”

Dora took a deep breath, ready to spin a tale, then stopped. Might as well pay the piper now as later. She needed both Violet’s and Tris’s help with Finn so they would have to know the truth. “I came upon him by the creek that runs alongside Hawkins’s farmland.” She stared directly into Tris’s face and sent a prayer heavenward. “He’s the escaped prisoner Lieutenant Scarlet is looking for.”

Tris’s expression was almost the mirror of Violet’s. His jaw dropped and his face turned bright red before darkening with unbridled anger. “What did you just say, Dora?”

Suddenly having had enough, Dora sat back, shoulders straight, her gaze unwavering. “I said the gentleman is Lord Aberfoyle, the man Lieutenant Scarlet has falsely accused of treason.” She leaned toward Tris. “And I intend to help him prove it false.”

Tris shot up off the chaise, heading for the sideboard. “You’ll do no such thing.”

Dora bounded up after him. “You have no right to tell me what I can and cannot do, Lord Trevor. I am not married to you.”

“Good thing you’re not, by Christ.” Tris poured half a tumbler of brandy.

“Tristan.” Violet had risen as well and trailed them over to the

sideboard. “You will not speak to a guest in our house in that manner. Dora is our friend to whom we owe a debt we can never repay.” She fixed her husband with a stern eye. “At the very least we will hear her out before making a rash judgment.” Violet turned to Dora. “Come back to the chaise, my dear. Let me ring for some fresh tea while Tris is settling his feathers, and you will start again.”

Grateful for her friend’s understanding, Dora allowed herself to be led back to her seat. When the tea had been served and Tris returned to the group, albeit across from Dora so he could stare mercilessly at her, she began her tale again. Taking the time to explain everything in the order in which it had happened, Dora thought she made more sense this time. Violet certainly looked more sympathetic toward Finn’s plight.

Tristan, however, remained belligerent.

“I simply cannot believe you have harbored a fugitive from the law, actively deceived the king’s soldiers, and perhaps worst of all, compromised your reputation by allowing a man unrelated to you to spend the night in your father’s house without any sort of chaperone present.” Tris’s hand tightened on his glass until the knuckles showed white. “I can scarcely believe this is you, Dora. You have never acted so recklessly before.”

“I never had the opportunity before.” She hated to sound impertinent, but she’d had enough of Lord Trevor’s superciliousness. “I’ve been under my father’s thumb my entire life. He’s the one who sent me here, without benefit of a chaperone, I might remind you.” She glared at Tris until he glanced away. “Since I’ve been here, I’ve had a taste of freedom I’d never have had otherwise. I’ve managed and run the household as I’ve seen fit, and it’s none the worse for it. It’s opened my eyes to what I’m capable of accomplishing on

my own.”

“But Dora, you seem to be ignoring the very real dangers your actions have opened you to.” This was a stern Tristan Dora had never seen before. “First and foremost, you have broken the law. You have been complicit in aiding and abetting this man, which makes you an accessory after the fact.”

Dora bit her lip. She’d known there would be consequences for helping Finn, but she couldn’t, in good conscience have done anything different. “What does that mean? Will I be taken to jail if the authorities find out?”

Tris set his drink down and leaned back, arms crossed. “As I understand the law, it will depend on several things, such as whether or not the criminal had been tried and found guilty. However, in most cases, the accessory will receive the same sentence as the criminal himself.”

Closing her eyes, Dora swallowed hard against the gorge rising in her throat. These consequences were so much worse than any she might have imagined.

“If the man is convicted of treason, Dora, he will die a particularly horrible death.” Grim-faced, Tris continued to stare at her. “We will have to pray you can throw yourself on the court’s mercy.”

“Do you intend to turn me in then, Tris?” Her tone was flat, masking her fury at him. “Because no one knows I’ve aided him save you and the members of my household. I’m certain they will not breathe a word of it.”

“Of course we will say nothing.” Violet put her arm around Dora.

With a sigh, Tris sat forward, his face suddenly less forbidding. “Dora, I would never do anything to cause you harm. You must know that. However, I’m worried you may come to grief because of this.”

"I do know it, Tris, and I'm sorry to have made you unhappy." At last, she could look at him without the profound hurt he'd just inflicted making her want to cast up her accounts. "But I will tell you that a bigger injustice has been done to Lord Aberfoyle, and no one seems to want to defend him save me. Lieutenant Scarlet has no reason to charge him with treason. Lord Aberfoyle may have broken a law, but it is not a treasonous offense."

"Can you even be certain the man is who he says he is? That he's not simply impersonating this Lord Aberfoyle?"

"That is who he told me he was, and I believe him." Dora met his eyes evenly. "I have no proof, save his word, but I do believe him. He certainly acts as gentlemen do. His manners, his speech, the way he carries himself, everything he does tells me he is a gentleman."

"That does not mean he is who he says he is."

Stubborn man. She held Tris's gaze as she pronounced, "If you met him, you'd believe it too."

"Oh, I fully intend to meet this blackguard," Tris bent forward to retrieve his drink, "and call him out for ruining your reputation."

Fisting her hands to keep from strangling the man, Dora fixed her erstwhile fiancé with a deadly stare. "He could not do that which you have already done, my lord."

"What?" Tristan's face drained of blood. "What are you talking about?" He turned to his wife, looking guilty. "I never did more than kiss her, my dear."

Violet shook her head. "Of all people, I'm sure you did nothing improper with Dora, Tris." She dropped her voice to an amused whisper. "You were too busy being improper with me."

“Lord Aberfoyle has not even kissed me, yet you accuse him of ruining me.” She had to make him see that Finn had done no more wrong than Tris. “Our broken engagement is what ruined me, Tris. All society believes we anticipated our wedding night, even though we did not. I must live with that stigma every day, not you.”

“But you said he spent the night in your house.” His outrage had begun to reassert itself. “Let society learn of that, and you won’t be received in any decent house in London.”

“Who will they learn it from, Tris? You? Violet?” She nodded to her friend, who simply shook her head. “We are well isolated here in the north. My father has made certain I have no contact with Polite Society, so no one will know unless one of us tells them.”

At last, Violet fixed her husband with a firm look. “No one will tell anyone about anything, my dear. Least of all Tristan or myself.” Her gaze sharpened. “You will refrain from terrorizing Dora, my dear. Also from suggesting you will engage in another duel.” Putting a hand on her belly, Violet scowled at her husband. “You will not put yourself in such danger again. And neither should you distress me in this manner.”

“Violet, my love. I beg your pardon.” He squeezed his wife’s hand then turned back to Dora. “If I cannot call him out, I should be allowed to make him marry you. If he is, as you say, a gentleman and a peer, he will at the least be considered an eligible suitor.”

“I will not have him forced him to marry me because he happened to spend the night under my roof, locked in his room.” Of course, that had only been true of the first night, however, Tris didn’t need to know that.

“You locked his bedroom door?” Violet nodded approvingly. “Well

done, my dear.”

“It was Larkin’s idea.” Thank God for her maid. “And I agreed. Lord Aberfoyle also had a sprained ankle that incapacitated him, if that makes it easier to stomach.”

“Not really,” Tris drained his glass, “but having your maid lock the door keeps me from wishing to see his blood spilled. Still, it would be better if you married.”

“That is not your decision to make.” That must truly gall the man. Each time she stated it, his jaw seemed to clench tighter. “In my father’s absence, I am mistress of the house and have a say in my own destiny. If you wish to write to my father about the situation and request to be made my guardian, you are perfectly welcome to do so. Until then, I say who I will and will not marry...although I believe I’d be better off with Lord Aberfoyle as my husband than with most other men.”

“Do you have a particular regard for him, Dora?” Excitement in her voice, Violet took her hand once more.

“She’s only known the man for two days, Violet. How can she know if she does or does not?” Tris dismissed her question with a bark of laughter.

“I seem to recall you telling me that you fell in love with me the first night we met, my dear.” Her wide smile indicated Violet was not above making her husband squirm. “Are you saying that cannot happen to anyone else in the world?”

Unwilling to discuss that particular question with Tristan in the room, Dora shook her head. “I merely think he is an honorable gentleman who, should we have time to deepen our acquaintance, might prove as likely a match as any other I have considered.” And she’d considered no one else

except Tris.

“Well, it is unlikely you will have the opportunity to ‘deepen your acquaintance’ with this Aberfoyle. Now that Scarlet and his men have left the county, the Scotsman can be sent on his merry way as well.” A look of relief came over Tris’s face.

“Actually, I’ve suggested that Lord Aberfoyle remain at Bromley until his ankle is completely healed.”

“What?” Tris came up out of the chair as though on a spring.

“He attempted to ride yesterday and reinjured his leg. He doubts he can ride for some days. So I offered to let him stay until he is able to join his uncle in London and get the mess regarding Lieutenant Scarlet resolved.”

“Dora, you cannot reside under the same roof as an unmarried man without a chaperone and remain unmarried.” At least Tris was trying to show some restraint this time. “You must come stay with us until this Aberfoyle has mended.”

“Leave him alone in my house with no hostess? Leave the staff with a guest and no mistress to manage the household? Come, Tris, you know that can never work.” Yet his argument was reasonable. She might flout convention for a night or two, but if Finn required a stay of five or six more days, not even the staff would see that as respectable.

“What will work is for me to repair to Bromley with you and act as your chaperone, my dear.” Violet sent a quick, silencing look to Tris. “Nothing could be simpler. Susan has not quite unpacked all my things. We can manage with one small trunk, I think. Lord Aberfoyle will likely be able to leave in a day or two.”

“No, my ladies, that will not work.” Tris stood and addressed them,

his voice strained. “First, I will not allow my wife, who is carrying my child, to reside in the same house as this ‘gentleman’ of whom almost nothing is known other than that he is a fugitive from the law. No,” he stared hard at Violet until she dropped her gaze, “in order for this to be arranged to everyone’s satisfaction, both Violet and I will stay with you.” At last, Tris’s usual devilish smile broke out on his lips. “I believe this house party will be quite illuminating, don’t you, Dora?”

Chapter 14

With more than a little trepidation, Dora led Violet and Tris through the front door of Bromley Manor.

Hanson's brows rose significantly, but otherwise he greeted her guests and took their things.

"Please tell Mrs. Carlyle we have guests for the next few nights. Have her and Annie prepare the Rose room for them. You can arrange for their things to be taken there as soon as possible, can you not, Hanson?"

"Of course, Miss Harper." The butler bowed. "I'll get James and inform both the housekeeper and cook about the new guests."

"Thank you, Hanson. Violet, Tris, let's wait in the upstairs parlor while your room is being readied." She quirked an eyebrow at them. "I beg your pardon. I assumed you wished to share a room, however if I have presumed too much, I can have another room readied for you."

Violet's lips puckered as she seemed to be containing her laughter.

Eyes narrowed, Tris shook his head at her. "One room will be sufficient, I believe."

Smothering her own laughter, Dora led them up the formal staircase to the first floor and the large room where her family had always gathered in the evenings. A somewhat masculine chamber, the walls painted a deep blue, and furnished in blues and bronze, it held a comfortable sofa and chairs in several groupings. The walls were strewn with paintings of hunting scenes, dotted here and there with mirrors and gilded sconces.

"Please make yourselves comfortable. I'll just ask Hanson to arrange for tea." She intended to do more than that. Dora hurried out of the drawing

room, picked up her skirts, and ran the opposite way down the corridor toward the viscount's apartments, praying Finn was there. A discreet knock was answered by a cheerful, "Come in."

Dora opened the door to find Finn fully dressed, lying on top of the green jacquard coverlet, his left foot swathed in bandages and propped on a pillow.

"Good afternoon, Dora." His cheery smile melted her heart so it took her a moment or two to reply to his greeting.

"Good afternoon. I see Mr. Cardrew did stop by while I was gone." She nodded to his foot.

"Aye. It's tender, but it should mend enough tae be able tae ride in a day or two." He cocked his head. "Yer cheeks are flushed. Are ye quite well?"

Automatically, Dora pressed her hands to her hot cheeks. "I climbed the steps too quickly." That plus the dread of the coming interview was making her more nervous. "I have some news."

"Oh?" He sat up, his face eager. "What is it?"

"My friends Lord and Lady Trevor are in the drawing room down the hall." She glanced away from him. "I told them you were here."

"I see." His face gave away nothing. Impassive as stone. "Have they come tae banish me from the house?"

"No, of course not." She rushed to the bedside, suddenly needing to be closer to him. "I am mistress here unless my parents are in residence, which, I assure you, they will not be any time soon. No one can deny the house to you save me."

"Then why dae ye look as though ye're standing on nails?"

She was incredibly tense. Dropping her shoulders, she breathed

deeply and tried to relax. “Because they wish to meet you and, as I predicted, Lord Trevor has quite a lot to say about your presence here and your current legal status.”

“I suppose he would if he’s someone who cares for ye, Dora.” He smiled at her, and a load lifted. “I can hold my own with his lordship and his wife.”

“You will have no problem with Lady Trevor. Indeed, she may be persuaded to be an ally in managing your journey to London.”

“Lord Trevor, however, will be a different business, I’ll wager.” Finn shrugged. “We will come tae an accord one way or another. I beg you no’ tae worry.”

“You can beg all you want, but it will do no good.” She grinned at him and got one in return. Finn was the most comfortable gentleman to be around she’d ever met. Was it any wonder she enjoyed his company so much? “Are you able to walk down to the drawing room? I can ask Hanson to produce a cane if that will help you.”

“That might be best.” Finn sat up on the bed and slid slowly to the floor. He winced as he put weight on his left foot. “I can always use it tae fend off Lord Trevor.”

Dora shuddered at the image but nodded. “I’ll order tea and ask Hanson to bring one to you. My father kept several here.”

“As soon as he does, I’ll go tae the drawing room.” Finn’s eyes sparkled, as if he expected to enjoy the coming confrontation. “I must beard the lion in his den,” he grinned at her, “except it’s actually yer den.”

“Make no mistake, whosever den it is, the only lion in residence will be Lord Trevor.” Dora left quickly to find Hanson. Finn’s light-hearted

attitude was encouraging, and attractive, but she'd known Tris for some time. Long enough to understand this introduction and ensuing conversation would test Finn's mettle. And if the Scotsman did or said anything Tris didn't like, he might very well challenge him despite Violet's admonition. She prayed the gravity of the situation had not escaped Finn.

Having found Hanson and given her orders, she carefully climbed back up the steps, dreading the coming interview almost as much as she had the one with Lieutenant Scarlet. She hated to think of Tris and Finn squaring off against one another and prayed they would keep their tempers in check.

She entered the drawing room to find Violet sitting on a bronze-colored sofa, Tris at the sideboard sipping what she believed was cognac from a crystal tumbler. "I found Hanson and have ordered tea. Lord Aberfoyle will be here shortly. He was resting after Mr. Cardrew attended his leg this morning."

Tris made a choking sound and spat out the swallow of liquor he'd just taken. "Damnation, Dora." He wiped at his face with his hand. "Now the doctor knows you have a gentleman living under your roof. If he hasn't already put two and two together and arrived at the conclusion that this man is the escaped prisoner, he's a fool and a quack." Tris daubed at the wet stain on his cravat with a handkerchief then threw up his hands. "If he *has* come to that conclusion, you can expect the lieutenant to knock on your door at any minute."

Dora paused to get her anger in check before answering. "Mr. Cardrew was informed that Lord Aberfoyle was Mr. Bowman, my cousin, who had arrived to break his journey to Edinburgh and injured his foot dismounting in the pouring rain yesterday evening." She stared at Tris, who

seemed unaffected. “I am not the fool you think I am, Tristan. Neither is Lord Aberfoyle.”

“What Lord Aberfoyle is—”

“What Lord Aberfoyle is is here, my lord.” Finn stood in the doorway, leaning on her father’s blackthorn stick with the embossed silver top. “And he is nae fool either.” He limped into the room and directly to Dora. “I believe ye were going tae introduce me tae yer friends, Miss Harper?”

Bless him for not using her first name in this instance. “I would be honored to have you meet them.” She turned her back on Tris and led Finn to Violet. “Lady Trevor, may I make known Lord Aberfoyle, a friend of mine. Lady Trevor is one of my dearest friends.”

“I am delighted to meet you, my lord.” Violet extended her hand as she cut her gaze over to Dora. “Miss Harper has told me something about you, but I would like for us to become better acquainted still.”

“I would be honored, Lady Trevor.” Finn kissed the air above Violet’s hand.

An exasperated groan behind them told Dora Tristan would explode were he not allowed to join the conversation. As much as she would’ve liked to build his suspense a little more, she wanted this meeting to go as well as it could. She turned to Tris. “Lord Aberfoyle, allow me to also present Lord Trevor. We have been good friends as well.”

“My lord.” Finn made a formal bow then straightened and very frankly looked Tris up and down.

“Lord Aberfoyle.” A crisp, almost curt bow from Tris, who then took out a quizzing glass of all things and proceeded to peer at Finn. “Miss Harper informs me that you have run afoul of the law in recent days.”

"I have, my lord. A trying time, made tolerable by Miss Harper's kind understanding. I could no' have made it tae this point wi'out her assistance. I canna repay her for her generous hospitality."

"Indeed." Tris dropped his quizzer and stared curiously at Finn. "Would you like something besides tea, Aberfoyle?"

Much too jovial for Tris, given his earlier animosity toward Finn. Yet here he was leading Finn over to the sideboard, about to ply him with drink. What he intended to say to him Dora wasn't sure she wanted to know. Still, she had an inkling of an idea that Finn could hold his own and Tristan might be in for a surprise.

"You really needn't worry about Tris, Dora." Violet was patting the sofa beside her. "He has promised me he will not issue a challenge of any kind to Lord Aberfoyle."

"Yes, but I cannot give the same guarantee about Finn." Wanting to test the waters, so to speak, Dora purposefully slipped his first name in.

True to her good nature, Violet did not look shocked at the intimacy, although she did have a certain twinkle in her eyes. "Finn?"

"Yes." Dora looked away just as the door opened and James appeared with tea. Thank goodness. She could hide her embarrassment while acting as hostess. "Short for Phineas."

"I suspected as much." Violet smiled and looked over at Tris and Finn, now deep into some discussion. "Although I have only just met him, I think he's a very personable gentleman. Two lumps of sugar and a good bit of milk." She accepted the delicate teacup with a pattern of pink and yellow roses, and stirred her tea slowly. "Have you formed an attachment so quickly, Dora? Is that wise?"

"I assure you it was not my intention but," Dora's gaze followed where Violet's had been and her heart beat double just to see Finn standing there, "one cannot help to whom one is drawn. I would like to spend more time with him, to see if I think we would suit." She dragged her gaze away from Finn and brought it back to Violet. "What can I do, Violet? Now you and Tris are in residence, I'm certain your husband will endeavor to keep us apart until Finn is ready to leave. A short time, true, but I do wish to talk with him more, like we did last night at dinner."

"I am sure we can arrange for the two of you to spend time together, if," Violet stared at her over her teacup, her brows raised, "and only if, you promise me you will do nothing whatsoever but talk."

Until that moment, Dora hadn't thought to do anything else, but now Violet had brought the idea to mind, she couldn't put it *out* of her mind. If they were alone together, might Finn try to kiss her? Did he think of her as more than just the woman who had saved him? And would a kiss be the entryway to deeper intimacies? She wasn't ready for such things yet, but if and when she was... "I will promise you to only talk to Finn if we are alone, but in return you must tell me..."

"Tell you what, my dear?"

"How to seduce Finn."

Somehow, Finn had known Lord Trevor would attempt to get him alone as soon as possible to read him the riot act where Dora was concerned. He supposed he could have put it off, but what point in delaying the inevitable dire warnings until after dinner? Might as well assure the gentleman immediately that he had no intention of seducing the lady, and that all his

actions had been quite honorable.

“Aberfoyle, what the deuce are you doing?” Trevor poured him a good two fingers of the spirits and set the glass on the sideboard before him.

“Sharing a drink with ye, my lord, among other things.” Finn sniffed the tumbler, pleased to discover an older vintage of cognac. “If ye mean why am I imposing on Miss Harper’s hospitality still, that is totally due tae my inability tae ride. Once I can travel, I will be on my way. I am in as much hurry tae go as ye are for me tae be gone.”

“And what about the damage you have already done to Miss Harper’s reputation? You spent the night together in a house with only servants for chaperones.” The gentleman’s face hardened, and Finn was taken aback by the ferocity he beheld. “Should word get out about this behavior—I have no idea that it would, but gossip seems to spring up from the earth like weeds—I will seek you out and you will, of course, marry her.”

Pompous ass. “I am almost insulted, Trevor, that ye think ye need tae state such a thing. O’ course, having stayed the night in her house without benefit o’ chaperone, although I was locked in my room, mind ye, I would certainly agree tae marry Miss Harper without hesitation.” He glared at Trevor. “A gentleman could dae nae less.”

“At least we understand one another, Aberfoyle.” Trevor nodded and sipped his cognac.

“I think yer larger problem may be convincing Miss Harper tae marry me.”

That notion seemed to give Trevor pause. His mouth firmed, as though the cognac had suddenly soured. Finally, he shrugged. “If she objects, she can be made to see reason. In the end, she’ll do what she’s told.”

“Ye dinna know her well, dae ye, my lord?” Impertinent, of course, but Finn didn’t suffer fools.

The tumbler in Trevor’s hand trembled slightly and the man’s jaw creaked with strain as he clenched it. “Had I not promised my wife to have restraint, you’d be receiving my challenge this instant, sir.”

“For making a simple observation? She told me the story o’ yer betrothal, my lord, and why she ended it. Ye’re still fond o’ Miss Harper, clear enough. However, I suggest that if ye think she’ll play the dutiful young woman and blindly dae what she is told, she has changed since ye last saw her, for that is no’ the Miss Harper I’ve encountered these past two days.”

Trevor eyed him, seemed to think over his words, then shook his head. “She does seem much changed since the winter. More self-assured, certainly, and bolder than I’ve ever seen her.” He sipped his drink, his face pensive. “When I knew her in the fall and winter, she was extremely docile.”

A snort of laughter erupted from Finn. “Docile is definitely no’ a word I would ever use tae describe Miss Harper, my lord.”

“I’m beginning to see that.” Lord Trevor shifted his tall frame from one foot to the other and regarded Finn with a little less hostility and a bit more curiosity. “Lieutenant Scarlet told me you are accused of treason. However, Miss Harper says it is a much less serious crime. Can you tell me ___”

A sudden flurry of activity and an actual shriek from Lady Trevor stopped Trevor’s inquiry flat.

“What the devil?” Trevor put down his drink. “Violet, are you quite all right?”

“Yes, my dear. Pay us no mind.” His wife was now laughing with

Dora.

What the deuce was going on? He and Trevor exchanged a glance, Trevor rolled his eyes, then they turned back to their drinks and conversation.

“Dora!” Violet let out a little shriek that drew the immediate attention of Finn and Tris.

After they reassured the gentlemen, the men went back to their conversation and Violet put her arm through Dora’s and pulled her close. “My dear, what are you saying?”

Fire brushed her cheeks, and Dora resisted the urge to fan them lest she draw more attention from the others. “That may not be the proper word for what I want, Violet. But I know nothing about courtship, and I need to know what I can do to make Finn desire me. The way Tris desires you.”

Violet pursed her lips. “Your mother didn’t teach you how to attract a gentleman’s attention?”

Shaking her head, Dora frowned. “I was betrothed to Tris from my seventh birthday. I guess she thought I didn’t need to know such things since we all knew who I was going to marry. It’s putting me at a distinct disadvantage now.” She cocked her head. “Did your mother teach you?”

To her surprise, Violet blushed as deeply as Dora had. “My mother died when I was quite young.”

“But you did learn from someone, didn’t you? You made Tris fall in love with you.”

“That was a very different thing, Dora.” Her friend looked so uncomfortable Dora began to regret asking her. “We met under trying circumstances that contributed to our falling in love.”

“I would consider finding a fugitive on a creek bank who could be arrested at any moment trying circumstances as well.” Dora hadn’t meant to sound belligerent, especially when Violet’s words actually gave her hope. “I beg your pardon, Violet. I didn’t mean to snap at you, but I’m simply at a loss for what to do.”

“Do you affect him that strongly, my dear? I know you said you are drawn to him, but marriage is a serious commitment. He is almost a stranger to you.”

“But he doesn’t feel like a stranger, Violet. That is the thing.” How could she explain the feelings she had whenever she and Finn talked or laughed together? Like she had found her home after years of fruitless searching. “He is like discovering a piece of music you can play perfectly because it is so much a part of you.”

“Oh, my dear.” Violet hugged her, and Dora thanked God once more that her friend was here. “I hope Lord Aberfoyle knows what a treasure he has in you. He will not deserve you, but if he truly loves you, that may be enough.”

“But how do I discover if he has any tender feelings for me at all?” That was the crux of the problem. She knew her own feelings quite well but had no idea if he returned her affections to any degree.

“As you said, you must spend more time with him. If he has any inkling he is interested in you, he will wish to be alone with you as well.” Nodding, Violet took up her tea. “Therefore, we must arrange for you two to go on an outing tomorrow.”

“Just the two of us?” A more exciting prospect Dora could not imagine.

“I know you should have a chaperone, but as that ship has sailed already, I do not think you need stand on ceremony.” Frowning, Violet held her teacup raised in a thoughtful pose. “Dancing is one of the most romantic activities, but alas we have no balls to attend until much later, and that will be in London in any case. The next most romantic thing I can think of is a picnic.”

“A picnic.” A vision of her and Finn sprawled on a plush blanket in a bucolic setting, eating delicious little sandwiches, cookies, and cakes rose before her. Could there be a more perfect backdrop for them to come to know each other better? She sat up, all excitement. “Can it be arranged?” She shot a look over at the gentlemen, who seemed to be getting on rather better. “Tris will not wish for me to go and certainly not without a chaperone.”

Violet patted her arm. “You prepare for the picnic. Invent some pretext for Lord Aberfoyle to accompany you. Let me worry about Tris.” Her smile was secret and knowing. “When the need is great, there are always ways to distract a gentleman.”

Chapter 15

Excitement made Dora's steps unusually light on the staircase next morning as she came down to breakfast. Violet had promised her time alone with Finn, a chance to see if their attraction might be mutual. It wouldn't be easy to steal time to allow their acquaintance to ripen, but Dora had faith in her friend. If anyone could get Tris out of the way, it was his wife.

The breakfast room was empty, even though it was already ten o'clock, the usual time the meal was served. With so many guests this morning, Dora had instructed Mrs. McComber to serve it in warming pans from the sideboard so everyone could help themselves. She took a plate and began to fill it. She didn't wish to eat overmuch if there was to be a picnic that afternoon, but the dishes smelled heavenly, and her mouth watered. By the time she returned to her seat at the long walnut table, her plate was piled high. She'd never eat all of this, but she'd make a start, at least. "James, I shall require a large pot of tea, please."

Dora had actually finished most of her breakfast when Violet entered, looking well rested and very...satisfied.

"Good morning, my dear. How are you?" Violet kissed Dora on the cheek then headed straight to the sideboard and took up a plate. "You will be happy to know that Tristan will be riding back to Yewtree Hall shortly. I have sent him on an errand there and while he is at home, I reminded him there are several letters to which he needs to reply. These two tasks should keep him busy for most of the afternoon, quite long enough for you and Lord Aberfoyle to enjoy your picnic."

Dora beamed at her from across the table. "You are the most

wonderful friend to me, Violet.” Unable to resist, she rose, scurried around the table, and threw her arms around her friend.

“You are more than welcome, although it was nothing any good wife would not do for her husband.” Violet’s eyes twinkled.

Dora’s cheeks blazed. Chances were slim that Violet was speaking of merely reminding her husband of his correspondence. Had her friend indulged in marital congress in order to persuade Tris to absent himself from Bromley for the day? Whatever she had done, Dora was more than grateful.

With a sigh, she returned to her breakfast, although her mind kept drifting back to thoughts of Finn. How she’d love to try some of those wiles on him if they were married. Her whole face flamed as though she’d been riding in the sun without a hat. Still, that was the goal. To find a gentleman she could love and who she was compatible with and hope he was equally in love with her. A tall order, but perhaps her luck in love had changed.

“Good morning, ladies.”

Dora looked up and into Finn’s intense blue eyes, and her mouth dried.

“Good morning, my lord.” Violet nodded cheerfully as she buttered a slice of toast. “How is your injury? I hope it did not cause you any discomfort during the night.”

“Thank ye, Lady Trevor. I think I slept excellently, but I dinna remember a thing, sae I suppose all was well.” He grinned at her. “Good morning, Miss Harper. Ye’re looking bonny this morning.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Dora had to force the words out. Would she be tongue tied with Finn all during the picnic? What a time to revert to her old, shy ways. “I see you are dressed to ride.”

He'd borrowed more of Simon's clothing, which included a brown close-fitting jacket, a dark burgundy waistcoat, and brown buckskin breeches that fit him amazingly well. They must have been older clothing, from years before, if they fit Finn. He looked magnificent.

"I am, Miss Harper. I thought it would be best if I try tae ride today, in the event I need tae leave precipitously." He cast a glance over her still-full plate. "May I bring ye something?"

Dora looked at her plate, heaped high with eggs, ham, sausages, kippers, and toast. "I thank you, my lord, but you would be hard-pressed to find anything I have not already tried."

Chuckling, Finn continued to the sideboard. "Well, if ye think of anything, I will do my best tae fetch it for ye."

Dora bit her lip and shot a glance at Violet, who stared sternly at her and mouthed the words, "Ask him."

"My lord," Dora forced herself to speak, "I was wondering if you would like some company on your ride? I thought, since the day is fair, we might take a picnic lunch with us and enjoy a little respite from all our concerns."

Turning to her from the sideboard—where his plate had begun to overshadow hers—he grinned brilliantly. "Noo that's a braw idea, Dora. We've had much tae deal with these last days sae I'll gladly take yer company. Do ye have a particular destination in mind?"

"I believe we need to stay in the inner parts of the estate as we do not know for certain the soldiers have indeed moved on." Dora sipped her tea, scarcely registering it was cold.

"Agreed. Lady Trevor, will ye and Lord Trevor accompany us? A

party is always welcome.”

A gallant statement given Tris’s animosity toward Finn.

“I am afraid my husband must attend to business on his estate. He rode over earlier this morning. I do not expect him before dinner.” Violet managed to affect a sad look. “And I do not feel up to riding these days. In fact, Lord Trevor is on the brink of telling me I should not do so. A friend of ours suffered a miscarriage after a horse bolted with her.” She shuddered. “I will not tempt fate when Tris’s heir is at stake.” She smiled and nodded to Dora. “I trust you will be in very capable hands nonetheless, my lord.”

Finn looked from Violet to Dora and grinned. “I dae as well, Lady Trevor.” His gaze strayed back to Dora where it rested long enough to make her heart beat like thunder in her chest. “I certainly dae.”

Sitting atop Hannibal once more, Finn surveyed his surroundings as he waited for Dora to join him. After breakfast, she’d excused herself to change into her riding habit and he’d gone ahead and mounted to see if he would indeed be able to ride today. Bandaged inside his boot, the offending ankle seemed a little painful but bearable. He’d know for certain as soon as they began to ride.

He eyed the long driveway then gazed at the expansive front lawn, appreciating the symmetry of its gardens, filled with red, gold, and purple blooms. A damn fine property from what he’d seen. Perfectly landscaped rather than the wilderness of lands around his home, Daingneach Mòr. Could someone who’d grown up in these cultured surroundings be equally happy in a vastly different setting?

The front door opened, and Dora emerged, now attired in the same

trim riding habit of brown edged in gold she'd worn yesterday with the addition today of a little black velvet jockey cap that looked utterly sweet perched on her golden curls. She looked up at him, shielding her eyes from the glare of the morning sun. "How is your ankle today?"

"We are about tae find out." He tried putting a little pressure on the limb and was rewarded with a twinge of pain. Still, it might be all right once they actually began to ride.

"Well, just so you know, I have my smelling salts at the ready." She patted the pocket of her habit before Alfred tossed her up onto Gretchen.

"Is that meant tae keep me from fainting? Because it will." Finn adjusted his reins, hoping he spoke the truth.

"I hadn't considered it." She smiled as she settled herself in the sidesaddle. "But if that can be your motivation to remain conscious, rest assured I will use them if necessary."

"Ruthless as well as ravishing."

Her cheeks pinkened as she expertly gathered the reins in her gloved hands. "Shall we begin slowly with a trot, or do you think a canter would be easier on you?"

"I ken even a walk will irritate it at first." He shrugged. "Let's start slow and see what I can stand."

Nodding, Dora urged Gretchen to a walk then almost immediately into a trot.

Finn took just a moment to admire the lovely figure she cut, sitting the horse as though they were one. What did the Greeks call them? Centaurs? If there were females of the species, Dora would be one. He tapped Hannibal's flank, and the willing horse shot away in pursuit of the mare.

The day was beginning well, with untold possibilities. He hoped some of the best ones would be realized.

They circled toward the back of the manor house then struck off across a series of fields that wound them deeper into the estate. Finn's ankle had made loud protestations at first, but once they settled into a canter, the pain eased. The exercise would do it good. Every so often, Dora would stop to point out some bit of interesting history regarding the land or its environs. She seemed to know everything about her father's property, although he'd gotten the sense she'd not been in residence here often or for very long until this summer. Perhaps she'd learned most things since she'd arrived. If so, she was as intelligent as she was beautiful.

He gazed at her—they had stopped for her to point out the oldest and largest oak on the estate—drinking in every word spoken in her lovely voice. He'd savor this day they had stolen together for a long time to come.

"Come on, Finn. We're almost there." She tapped Gretchen, and they broke into a canter again across a perfect green pasture, heading for a little rise.

He hurried after her, wondering where "there" was. Was she taking him to a special place?

She stopped at the crest of the small rise, and when he joined her, found she gazed down the gentle slope at the prettiest sight he'd seen on the property. A medium-sized lake lay spread out before them, the water dark with catkins growing around the sides. At the far edge was a stand of trees, and at the nearest point, a beautiful marble folly overlooked the lake.

"This is my favorite spot at Bromley," Dora told him, smiling broadly. "Perhaps my favorite in the whole world. I discovered it a week after I

arrived, and I've ridden here at least once or twice a week since. It's so peaceful and calm. And beautiful."

"It is, indeed. I dinna blame ye for wanting tae come here. Thank ye for sharing it with me." Even without her words, he'd have known she loved this spot.

She darted a glance at him then started Gretchen down the slope. They headed for the folly and when they arrived, she hopped down and quickly began to set up their picnic.

After carefully dismounting, Finn joined her, untying the basket from behind her saddle and bringing it to her under the marble gazebo. The folly boasted stone benches and a table, and Dora made quick work of setting out their repast.

At last, they sat down to the picnic lunch, a culinary triumph for Mrs. McComber, with cold spiced chicken and glazed ham, bread and cheese, pork pies, vegetables in aspic, fairy cakes, chocolate biscuits, and a bottle of wine. A feast proverbially fit for a king.

"Allow me tae serve ye." Finn took Dora's plate and filled it with a bit of everything, until it rivaled his plate at breakfast. "Here ye are." He laid it before her then began on his own. "We'll be well and truly fed if we can manage tae eat a quarter o' this."

Some time later, as they sat companionably silent, too full to speak, Finn sighed. The day had turned out to be wonderful beyond anything he'd ever expected. His ankle was mending, now strong enough for him to ride out. The picnic had been charming, in a bucolic setting to rival anything in Shakespeare. And the companionship, beyond perfect. They had spoken of his home at Daingneach Mòr, of his childhood there and hers in Wiltshire.

Neither had been ideal, but both had some fond memories.

“I wish I could take ye tae Aberfoyle.” He sipped his wine and leaned back on the stone bench. “Ye could see for yerself the wild beauty o’ the land. Meadow after meadow o’ heather sae it looks like a carpet o’ lavender. Nearby is the River Forth, as clear and cold as yer wee loch but stretching farther than the eye can see. Wild waterfalls throughout the land and,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, “there is Doon Hill rising up like a specter out o’ the very earth itself.” He raised his hands high. “‘Tis where the faerie folk live, and if ye’re not careful, they take ye off tae live under the hill with them.”

Dora shivered then laughed. “I can almost see it, Finn. It sounds wild and wonderful.”

“Very different from here, yet still charming.”

“The way you describe it, I must like it. Such a wild and exciting place.” Dora drained the last drops from her glass. “I would love to go there one day.”

If only he didn’t have to travel to London instead. “Once my affairs are put in order, I’d like tae come back here. Call upon ye formally.” He gazed into her eyes, blue as the lochs near his home, and leaned toward her. “If ye would allow me tae.”

Her breath came in little gasps, but she leaned toward him as well. “I would be more than happy to enjoy your company again.”

She was so close he could smell the sweet scent of roses that enveloped her, and he could resist no longer. He continued forward, compelled as though an invisible hand urged him, until his lips met hers, and the sweetness he found there undid him completely.

Chapter 16

The look in Finn's eyes, darker than she'd ever seen them before, told Dora he wanted to kiss her, even before he began to lean toward her. Her heart sped up, so fast she could hear nothing save the blood beating in her ears. Without thought, she leaned into him, closing her eyes just as their lips met.

Firm, yet gentle, he pressed his mouth to hers. With the lightest touch, he moved his lips against hers, and heat cascaded through her, as though she stood before a raging fire. Yet all she could think was how incredibly sweet he was, this moment was. All last night she'd wondered what it would be like to kiss Finn. Happily, the reality far outshone anything she'd imagined.

Emboldened by the flames licking through her veins, she pressed back, needing him to understand she wanted this as well. Never had she experienced such a tenderness toward anyone, a longing to enfold them and be enfolded in return. When he gently cupped her cheek, she wept with joy, unable to contain the happiness filling her to the brim.

Slowly, he pulled away, although he continued to cradle her face. "Was that yer first kiss?"

Oh, how she wished it had been. So much more wonderful than the awkward ones she'd shared with Tris. She shook her head. "No, but it should have been."

His hand lingered on her face, warm against her skin. "By all rights, I should noo ask for yer hand in marriage."

Her breath stopped. She gazed at him, trying to discover if his words were perfunctory or if, perhaps, there was something more to them. *I wouldn't*

mind if you did. The unexpected thought leaped to mind and almost out of her mouth. She clamped her lips shut. While she could think such a thing, it was much too soon to confess it. “I don’t believe that’s necessary.”

“Truly?” His startled look took her aback. “Ye dinna fear for yer reputation, then?”

That reasoning would be sound, but no one knew of this new indiscretion save the two of them, and Dora was certain he would not tell a soul. Neither would he divulge that he had stayed under her roof without a chaperone. So he knew her reputation was safe as well as she did. Did that mean he might actually *wish* to marry her? The import of that—after months of thinking no one would ever wish to wed her—all but took her breath away. She had to wait a moment, gather her thoughts, before reassuring him. “No, Finn. I trust you to keep it safe.”

He sighed and cast his gaze to the ground. “It’s just as well ye said nae. In my current state ye’d be getting nae bargain with me for a husband.” He sat back, dejection on his face. “If ye remember, I’m a criminal on the run from the authorities.”

Hating to see him so despondent, Dora boldly took his hand. “But you will not be one forever, Finn. You will go to London, find your uncle, and this will all be over.”

“I ken the truth o’ that, but at the moment it disna feel true.” He wouldn’t look at her, but he continued to hold her hand. “Scarlet hates me enough he may find a way tae make the charges stick and at the least have me imprisoned for half a year. Or worse.”

Dora bit her lip, thinking what she could say to put the situation into a different perspective. “I don’t think that’s what you’d need to be worrying

about. If you did wish to marry me, you'd have to run a worse gauntlet than Lieutenant Scarlet and his men."

"What dae ye mean?" At least she'd gotten his attention.

"As I am only nineteen, you'd have to ask my father's permission." She grinned at him. "I warn you, he is ruthless in both his business and personal life. You would not have an easy time of it."

"Are ye actively tryin' tae deter me from asking for yer hand, Miss Harper?" The lightness had come back into his tone, and Dora thanked goodness for it.

She gave his hand a squeeze. "I'm just warning you, it would not be an easy task."

"Nor one I could undertake until the other matter is resolved." He lifted her hand and placed a kiss on the knuckles. "I must clear my name afore I can move ahead with my life." He gazed at her, a strange light in his eyes. "Perhaps when that happens, I'll ask ye again."

"Perhaps by then my answer will have changed." If only they could have some time to know each other better.

"We've kenned each other a short while only."

He seemed to have caught her thoughts. She'd never had that happen with anyone else.

"Yesterday I was nothing more tae ye than a nuisance. And two days ago, ye'd never even heard o' me." He squeezed her hand and let it go. "Life can change in an instant, *m'eudail*. Dinna think it canna."

Dora sat back, mulling that over. He was right; life changed from moment to moment. They had been flung together in a stressful situation. No wonder she now had warm feelings for the man she'd rescued. Who wouldn't

have? But how did she know her own interest in him wasn't simply born of loneliness? And would that change once she met other gentlemen? "I suspect you are correct in that. We only know a little about each other."

His face broke out in the most charming of smiles. "But we dae ken some things, dae we no'? For me, a little time has yielded a big harvest. I ken ye're kind and witty. Funny and intelligent. All qualities most necessary in a wife." He chuckled. "At least for me. Sae ye're well on the way tae being at the top o' my list."

"Oh, I am?" Arrogant in all things, even a faux proposal. Of course, she'd not expected him to speak of affection or love. Not really. Not when they'd known each other but two days. Her own feelings, which ran hot and cold, were likely what they called calf love, and could change like the moon in all her cycles. Still, she would have liked to hear that he esteemed her not solely for these sterling attributes, but for some deeper manner of feeling. She did a mock bow. "You do me great honor, *my lord*, in deigning to place me on your list."

"Och, lassie. Dinna be fooled." That fierceness returned to his voice, and she caught her breath. "My blood runs hotter than the midsummer sun when I look at ye." He gazed intently at her, and she began to feel the heat as well.

Without warning, he swooped in again, taking her lips, though there was nothing gentle about it this time. He took and took, kiss after rapturous kiss.

Her head began to spin. She couldn't breathe but didn't want to stop kissing him long enough to take a breath. Falling backward. She was falling...

Dora sat up sputtering, the sickening smell of *sal volatile* still in her

nose. “What...”

Finn held her silver filigree vinaigrette up for her to see. “I hated tae dae it, but I dinna ken what else tae dae.” He smiled and stroked a stray strand of hair back over her head. “Although I must say I’ve never kissed anyone who swooned because o’ it.” He cocked his head. “Has this ever happened before?”

“You make it seem like I’m a...a Jezebel. I’ve only ever kissed Tris before.” She sat up cautiously, but the spell had passed. “And it was nothing like that.”

“Good.” He passed the vial to her. “If I wasna yer very first kiss, at least I will be the first tae kiss ye intae oblivion.”

“Yes, that honor is all yours, Finn.” She grinned at him and began to gather their dishes, a calmness spreading through her. For now, she had an inkling of a way forward. They must see what the next days and weeks would bring. If he could stay here at Bromley, it would be easier for them to determine if their spark could burst into the flame those kisses had promised. Dora automatically continued stacking dishware until the picnic hamper was filled. If he had to leave, well, then it would be harder for them to grow closer. But not impossible, surely.

Finn scattered some crumbs of leftover bannocks for the birds, corked the bottle of wine, and stored it in the hamper. “Are ye ready tae return?”

“Yes, I believe I am.” Dora smiled to herself.

Her little outing had been enormously successful by her estimation, if only as assurance that Finn did indeed have an interest in her. As he’d suggested he should ask for her hand, even though just to save her reputation, then wasn’t there hope of a true proposal in the future? Given the

circumstances, and those heady kisses, there was undoubtedly enough material for her to continue to build a castle in the air for her and Finn.

Dinner that evening proved to be more of a strain than Dora would have believed.

She'd gone upstairs immediately upon their return for some rest and to try to calm herself, even though that had been a lost cause. She'd asked Larkin to awaken her when it was time to dress for dinner, but she'd lain awake, reliving their picnic. Especially their kisses. Her toes had curled at the very thought of it.

At last, she'd risen, not ever having closed her eyes, and started to dress. Or tried to. She'd chosen and rejected three gowns before Larkin put her foot down and insisted she wear her blue lutestring. "It's the most elegant gown you have, Miss Harper. And you have so many guests tonight, you will want to look your best, I think?"

If Finn was going to be there, of course she wanted to look her best. Their conversation this afternoon weighed heavily on her each time she thought of it. He might have warm feelings for her now, but as he said, life could change in an instant. When he left to pursue his matter with the army in London, would he forget about her, about their kisses in the folly? She was certain she never would. But every person's sensibilities were different. The waiting and wondering would surely drive her mad. Especially if he was her one and only chance for happiness. She couldn't know that, of course, but after this afternoon, it certainly felt like it.

They had all gathered in the downstairs receiving room and proceeded in to dinner, Tris insisting on escorting Dora, leaving Finn, once more attired

in Simon's old clothing, to offer his arm to Violet. How her former fiancé was going to take to the news of a possible interest between her and Finn Dora shuddered to think. At least she would not have to worry about that for some little time to come.

"Aberfoyle, were you successful in your riding today?" Tris cut into his roast beef industriously.

"My ankle protested a wee bit, but it settled after the first mile or sae. I believe it will serve in another day or two." Finn fiddled with his wineglass, shooting a look at Dora.

Of course, Tris would wish him gone as soon as possible. Well, the sooner Finn found his uncle, the sooner he could return to her.

"That is very fortunate, for I have a bit of disturbing news." He looked pointedly at Finn. "I stopped at The Green Tree after taking care of some business this morning and was startled to meet Lieutenant Scarlet and his men coming out of the establishment."

Dora's fork clattered to her plate. Her gaze shot straight to Finn, her heart in her throat.

He blinked as he looked at the stunned faces around the table before looking down at his plate. "I thank ye for that bit o' information, Trevor." He looked directly at Dora. "I'll have tae leave at first light. The sooner I am away, the sooner ye're all out o' danger."

"Lord Aberfoyle, I am terribly sorry for this unfortunate turn of events." Violet leaned toward him, placing a hand on his arm. "You must go in haste to London to set this matter aright."

To save her life, Dora could not have summoned a word. Why were the soldiers still in the area? Why couldn't they bloody well leave them alone?

Now Finn would have to leave her. And the possibility that he might not return to her more of a reality than she could bear.

“We’ll plan your journey when the ladies retire to the drawing room, Aberfoyle. If I’d brought more than the one carriage, I’d loan you mine. That would help throw Scarlet off the scent.” Tris seemed to have resolved his pique at Finn, although his good humor might stem from the knowledge that Finn would soon be gone. “As it is, I have but the one carriage, and I must have that at my wife’s disposal at such a delicate time, you understand.”

Dora wished she could offer her father’s carriage, but when she’d arrived at Bromley in April, the coachman had discovered a break in the transom. She’d had her father’s coachman take it into Leeds for repairs as part of his journey back to Wiltshire, but as she’d always preferred to ride horseback, she’d neglected to have Alfred fetch it once it was repaired.

“I dae indeed, my lord. Think nothing o’ it. The journey will be swifter on horseback, in any case. I thank ye for the thought and any help ye may be able tae give me.” Finn had reverted to the persona she’d first met by the creek, a hardened man on the run, thinking only about outsmarting his adversary. He’d have little time for her now, which would be hard to bear, but was as it should be. He must survive if they were to have the hope of a future.

Tris looked directly at Dora. “Perhaps, my dear, you and Violet should retire now and leave Aberfoyle and me to plan his escape in the morning.”

Dinner was only half over, but Dora’s appetite had fled the moment Scarlet’s name was mentioned. She wanted desperately to stay and help them, but as she knew little about the surrounding area, other than Bromley and Brompton, even Dora could see she’d only be a hindrance, and maybe a

distraction to Finn when he needed all his wits.

With a nod, Dora rose, as did Violet, and headed for the upstairs drawing room, where so short a time ago she'd been happy.

"You must not despair, my dear." Violet settled into her accustomed place.

Dora slumped onto the chair opposite her. "I cannot help it, Violet. I do not know what to do. I cannot bear to let him go." She understood he had to leave for London, but now that the time was here, his departure imminent, she feared the worst would happen and she'd be reduced to a pleasant memory the moment he rode out of sight.

"Has something changed since this morning, my dear?" Violet had a knowing look in her eyes.

"It has. Oh, Violet. Everything has changed." Unable to stop herself, Dora moved across to the sofa and burrowed into Violet's arms. "Finn kissed me," she choked out before bursting into tears.

"Did you want him to?" Her friend held her closer.

"Of course I did." Dora's words were muffled, but Violet seemed to understand.

"I suspected as much. But then this is good, isn't it, my dear?" Violet peered into her face as best she could.

"Yes, but now I don't want him to leave." The very thought of having to tell Finn goodbye, not knowing when or if she'd ever see him again, was like a knife in her heart. "I know he must go. I knew it before Tris saw the soldiers. He must clear his name, but I wish there was some other way. What if he leaves and decides he doesn't want to return to me?"

Violet smiled and opened her mouth then closed it without speaking.

Her face grew somber. “Yes, I’m afraid that is a possibility. You have known each other for mere days, during some trying experiences. When men and women meet under such extraordinary circumstances, sometimes passions flame only to be snuffed out once the danger is past.”

“He said today that our affections might change with time, as they have these past two days.” Tears gathered in Dora’s eyes. To be so close to having the promise of love fulfilled and have it dashed away was unbearable. “If only we could stay together, surely our regard for one another would continue to grow.”

“I suspect that is so, my dear. But it is impossible.” Violet patted her shoulder. “He must make haste to London to clear his name.”

If he must go, then at least there should be some way she could—

Dora sat straight up. “I’ll go with him.”

“What?” Violet grasped her arm, perhaps afraid Dora would jump up and leave that instant. “You can do no such thing, Dora. Think, for goodness’ sake. You cannot ride to London with a man to whom you are not married. You cannot ride on horseback so far in any case. London is five days journey from here. I know, for Tris and I just made that arduous trip.”

“We can take Father’s carriage.” Dora smiled triumphantly. Just because the carriage hadn’t been retrieved from Leeds didn’t mean it couldn’t be. “I wasn’t thinking properly when Tris brought up his carriage at dinner.” The mention of the soldiers had likely addled her brain with fear. “My only thought was that the vehicle wasn’t here. I’ll send Alfred into Leeds first thing in the morning to fetch it. There would be a single day’s delay, no more. Then Finn and I can travel respectably as husband and wife, which will help throw the soldiers off our trail.”

“Dear Lord. You have run mad, Dora.” Violet shook her, none too gently. “If you pose as man and wife, travel together as such, and the lie is exposed, you will be shunned by Polite Society for the rest of your life. Your family will disown you, without possibility of reconciliation. And Tristan.” Violet’s face paled. “Dora, he will either lock you in your room and literally throw out the key until Lord Aberfoyle has departed. Or, if you manage to leave with him, Tris will track you both down and call him out.” Wrapping her arms around herself, Violet shivered. “You know he will, Dora, you must know it.”

A sense of walls closing in on her drove Dora to rise and pace about the room, all the while snatching at even the most farfetched plans. “Then you and Tris could act as chaperones to us. No one could say there was anything improper about the four of us traveling to London together.”

Sadly, Violet shook her head. “Perhaps if I were not increasing, something might be arranged, although having just made the journey I’m not certain I’d be able to repeat it with so little time to recover. But in my condition, my dear, even if I thought I could undertake it, Tristan would forbid me. And he would be right to do so.”

Dora heaved a deep sigh but nodded. Violet could not accompany her. It had been utterly selfish to suggest such a thing. And yes, Tris would indeed track them down and there would be bloody hell to pay when he did. But all she could think was that she would be horribly miserable when Finn left, wondering all the time if he would return. There had to be something she’d missed. Some way for Finn to stay or for her to go with him.

The drawing room door opened, revealing Hanson.

“I forgot to order tea, Hanson. Can you please ask Mrs. McComber to

send some up? I require something hot and strong at the moment.”

“Very good, Miss Harper, but I am here to announce another guest.”

Lieutenant Scarlet. It could only be him. Dora stumbled backward until she clutched the back of her chair, gripping it tightly so she could remain upright. She gritted her teeth and gave a slight nod.

“The Duchess of Ostroda.”

A small woman with a black walking stick swept into the room, dressed in a magnificent purple and gold gown with a towering headdress of feathers in the same colors.

“Aunt Mimi!” Dora gasped. “Whatever are you doing here?”

Chapter 17

Stunned, Dora stood stock still as Aunt Mimi came forward to hug her. Why was her aunt here?

“Dora, you look exceedingly well, my dear.” Her aunt bussed her cheeks then stood back, eyeing her up and down. “The north country obviously agrees with you.”

“Welcome, aunt.” Dora stood helpless, her thoughts spinning wildly. What were they going to do now? How could she explain Finn’s presence to Aunt Mimi?

“I don’t know if you remember me, Duchess.” Violet appeared beside them, coming to her rescue, bless her.

“Miss Carlton, as I recall.” Aunt Mimi looked at Violet curiously, but without censure. Considering that the last time her aunt had seen Dora’s friend she’d just been attacked by Simon, it would be a miracle if she’d forgotten.

“I am now Lady Trevor, Duchess. My husband and I have only just retired to his estate not far from here.”

Aunt Mimi nodded. “You look very well, my lady. Much better than the last time I saw you.”

Acting as though nothing were amiss, Violet chattered on, giving Dora time to settle. “Of course, we wanted to visit dear Dora as soon as possible.”

“Please have a seat, Aunt Mimi.” She indicated the sofa and took her aunt’s arm to lead her there. Violet took Dora’s chair opposite. “I’m sorry that we have finished with dinner, however Hanson is bringing tea. If you need

something more than tea and cakes, I can have Cook send up a supper tray for you.”

“No need, my dear. I supped at the last inn we stopped at, so I will be fine until the morning.” She sat straight on the sofa, her hands resting on her gleaming ebony stick. “Although tea is desirable at any hour.”

“You must forgive me, aunt, if I am a little tongue-tied. I am simply astonished to find you here in Yorkshire. Whatever has brought you here?” A sudden premonition struck dread in Dora’s heart. “My parents are not ill, are they? I have not heard from Mamma in some time, although I think that is because Father forbids her to write.”

“In that you are correct. Although why Harriet still allows your father to bully her is beyond me.” Aunt Mimi shook her head. “I believe now she does anything he asks just to console him for the loss of your brother.”

“That is likely true.” Dora sighed in relief. The family did not need another tragedy this year. Still, that meant there was no explanation for her aunt’s presence. “But I am still mystified as to how you come to be here without warning. If this were merely a social visit, I’d have expected a letter from you that I might be prepared to entertain you properly.”

“Well, you have guessed correctly, niece, that this is not entirely a visit of my own choosing.” She nodded to Dora. “Of course, I am always delighted to see you, but I am primarily here on business from your father.”

“Father’s business?” Dread trickled down Dora’s spine, and she exchanged glances with Violet. Any business belonging to her father was likely to end up causing her pain. Had he sent her aunt to evict her from Bromley? Dismiss her servants? Anything was certainly possible. “What in the world could that be? And why send you, aunt?”

“As to why I am the ambassador of the tidings, I fear I was in the wrong place when he needed an emissary. I remained in London after your parents returned home this past spring. The atmosphere at the house in Wiltshire is very somber as it is still a house of mourning. I preferred to stay in a house I rented in Mayfair, which is quite cheerful. But it positioned me closer to you when your father made his business deal.”

How would a business deal concern her? Dora was about to ask that very pointed question when the door opened. “Put the tea on the sideboard, please, Hanson.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I have no tea about me, I’m afraid.”

Dora’s head shot up at the sound of Tristan’s voice. Dear God, and Finn right behind him. “Lord Trevor, I did not see that it was you. Aunt Mimi, you may also remember Lord Trevor?”

Tris stiffened as if he’d received a blow then he seemed to relax and directed his most charming smile at her aunt. “I will be devastated, Duchess, if you do not.” He took her hand and kissed it.

“How could I forget you, Lord Trevor?” Her aunt seemed to be repressing a smile. “Never have I experienced such excitement in a single quarter of an hour.” She then looked inquiringly past Tris to Finn.

Dora’s heart sank.

“Dora, will you introduce me to this gentleman? Surely, we have not met.” Aunt Mimi’s brows rose. “I daresay I’d remember him.”

“Duchess,” Tris cut in smoothly, “allow me to make known to you Lord Aberfoyle, a friend of mine from London. Aberfoyle, this is the Duchess of Ostroda, Dora’s aunt.”

“I am pleased to meet you, my lord.” Her aunt cut her gaze toward

Dora and shook her head. And Dora could have sworn she heard her aunt mutter, “Such a shame.”

“I too am pleased tae meet ye, Duchess.” Finn smiled his widest and followed Tris’s lead by kissing her hand.

“Please make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen.” Before she could say anything else, the door opened to reveal Hanson, a full tea tray in his hands, followed by James with a tray laden with pastries. Thank goodness for the distraction. The butler set his tray on the table to her left, while James put his on the sideboard. “Thank you, Hanson. That will be all for now. Is Mrs. Carlyle preparing a room for my aunt?”

“At this moment, the Bromley room is being readied.” The most elaborate of the guest bedrooms, created in the event of a visit from royalty or foreign dignitary. As her aunt was a duchess from Poland, the choice was indeed admirable.

“Very good. Thank you, Hanson. That will be all.” Dora lifted the teapot and began to pour. The familiar ritual helped calm her frayed nerves. “Aunt Mimi was just about to tell us how she comes to make this surprise visit, weren’t you, aunt?”

“Indeed. Make mine with the tiniest bit of milk and sugar. Just enough to take the bitterness out of the tea, please.” As if Dora didn’t remember how her aunt took her tea. “Well, I was telling Dora that because I was in London, and therefore the closest relative who could travel here, her father insisted that I come fetch her home.”

“Fetch me home!” The teapot crashed onto the tray, rattling all the teacups in their saucers. “What do you mean you are to fetch me home?” This was worse than the fear of Finn’s discovery. “Why?”

With her mouth pressed in a straight line, Aunt Mimi looked her squarely in the eyes. “He’s arranged another marriage for you, Dora.”

A peculiar roaring filled her ears, and Aunt Mimi’s face wavered, turned to black.

Coughing, Dora opened her eyes on four faces peering anxiously down at her. Violet held her vial of smelling salts. “What happened?”

“You swooned, dear.” Violet tucked the vial into her pocket. “Can you sit up?”

Nodding, Dora came upright as the others backed away.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Aunt Mimi peered keenly at her. “I am sorry to have caused you such a shock, although I didn’t believe the news would elicit quite that amount of consternation. You must have known your father would not let you linger here long, like a fallow field, before finding you the most advantageous match possible.”

“But he assured me I was ruined when I jilted Lord Trevor.” That had been her one saving grace, to know she was unmarriageable and therefore had escaped her father’s machinations.

“Apparently with the correct incentives, one is never too ruined.” Aunt Mimi sniffed. “I told him he would not find you easy to convince. When you thwarted your father by refusing to marry Trevor, you showed me you were made of sterner stuff than we’d anticipated.” Her aunt gave her a smug smile. “Your father saw it as a childish fit of pique, but I knew better. But he’s been obsessed recently with finding you a husband. Any husband, it seems. I visited with your parents often when they were in Town, and Melchior was constantly writing to one gentleman or another to see if he could entice them to marry you.” She sighed and sipped her tea. “Apparently, at last, he has

done so.”

“Well, I won’t do it.” Dora glared defiantly around the room. “I won’t go home, and I certainly won’t marry whoever it is he wants to force me to wed.”

“Do you know who he’s trying to betroth Dora to, Duchess?” Tris had stepped up to her aunt, his voice low and strained.

“No one grand, I think. I didn’t know the name when he told me. Sir Harry Walters of Cambridgeshire.” Her aunt shook her head. “Do you know him, Lord Trevor? Lord Aberfoyle?”

Dora had avoided looking at Finn during this ordeal, but now she did meet his eyes. She fancied the pain in her eyes was reflected in his.

Why couldn’t they have had the chance to court properly, then for Finn to finally apply to her father? Even if he wished to ask for her now, it would not be too late, except Finn could not ask for her hand while he was an escaped prisoner. By the time his troubles were straightened out, her father would have her married off if he could have his way. Well, he would not succeed. According to the law, she had to consent to the marriage, and she simply would not do it.

“I dinna ken the name, Duchess.” Finn spoke calmly, though his body was strung tight as an archer’s bow.

“I know Sir Harry.” Tris crossed his arms over his chest, his face drawn. “He’s not a bad man. A middle-aged widower with two children. A steady, capable man. No vices other than smoking a pipe or two and enjoying a drink once in a while.” Tris shrugged. “I’m not sure what your father wants from him, other than for him to take Dora so he can wash his hands of her.”

“He can wash his hands of me without saddling me with such a

husband.” Dora’s stomach roiled at the thought of marrying some stranger. “You can tell him, Aunt Mimi, or I will simply write and inform him that under no circumstances will I marry that man.”

“I told him you would refuse to cooperate, my dear.” Her aunt patted her hands. At least she seemed to be on her side and not Father’s. “He seemed to think the threat of being turned out into the hedgerows was enough to bring you in line.”

“Well, it isn’t.” Dora met Finn’s gaze, a thoughtful if peculiar look on his face. “I will not be bullied by that man again. It’s not as though I have nowhere to go.” She was certain she’d be welcome in Tris and Violet’s home until she reached her majority and inherited her fortune. Or until she married.

“*Mo ghràidh.*” Finn reached across and took her hand, startling Dora greatly. That odd look was still on his face. “I think ’tis time we made yer aunt privy tae our little secret.”

Finn’s voice sent a shock through her. What on earth was he talking about?

Tris and Violet exchanged a knowing glance.

Did he wish to tell Aunt Mimi that he’d spent the night here without a chaperone? Or that he’d kissed her out at the folly? Her aunt’s reaction to that revelation might be better than Tris’s. At any rate, their indiscretion would make it impossible for her to wed Sir Harry. “Yes, I suppose it is best, Finn.”

Finn straightened in his chair but kept tight hold of her hand. “Duchess, when Lord Trevor introduced me as Lord Aberfoyle and his friend, he dinna give ye the most pertinent information about me.”

Terrified, Dora squeezed his hand hard enough to turn it to jelly. The fool was going to tell her he was an escaped prisoner, a fugitive from the law.

How in God's name did he think that was going to help her at all?

"He did not?" Aunt Mimi frowned at Finn then at Tris. "Well, what did he omit?"

Finn looked at Dora and smiled devilishly. "The fact that I am Dora's husband. And as she is my wife, she canna marry anyone else."

"Finn!"

"Aberfoyle! What the deuce—"

"Dora, what is he saying?"

"But, Dora, is this true?"

The pandemonium that erupted was loud and long-lived. Finn decided to wait until most of those present had calmed down before addressing his statement, which he was actually beginning to regret.

"Finn!" Dora's eyes had grown wide and round as the moon. "Why did you say that?" she whispered under the cover of the others shrieking around them.

"It seemed like the best idea at the moment." He stared into her eyes. "Trust me and follow my lead."

"Aberfoyle, by God, what have you done?" Trevor had shot to his feet and looked ready to jerk Finn to him so he could pummel him. He needed to appease the man and persuade him to play along with his subterfuge as well.

"If ye'll give me a chance tae explain, Trevor, I think ye willna feel the need tae call me out." He tried, probably unsuccessfully, to send the man the same message he'd given Dora. Since he'd done it with his eyes alone, he doubted it had gotten through.

"Dora, why did you not tell me?" Lady Trevor seemed the only one

not bent on terrorizing him.

“It was rather sudden, Violet.” Dora hung her head. Good girl. She was playing along. “We decided to keep it from everyone, so I was sworn to secrecy.”

The *boom, boom* of the duchess’s cane on the floor caught everyone’s attention. One by one, they all went silent and turned to look at her. “If I must break heads in order to be heard, I have no compunction.” She glared at Finn in particular. “Doubt it at your peril.”

“I would never mistrust yer word, Duchess.” Finn bowed to the older woman. If they could convince her of their marriage, they might buy themselves some time to free Dora from the blasted betrothal her father was trying to saddle her with.

“You married my niece out of hand? Without benefit of the consent of her guardian?” The duchess’s shocked countenance had given way to one of stern indignation. Unfortunately, the lady was intelligent and did not mince words. “Was it also without benefit of clergy?”

“Actually, it was.” Finn grinned and seemed to relax. “Would ye like the whole story?”

As one, the little group nodded.

“Very well. It began last autumn.” He drew in a deep breath and sent a prayer up that he didn’t end up digging his own grave with this scheme. “I was in Town for the Little Season and at some entertainment or the other, Trevor introduced me tae Miss Harper.” He’d not had much time to work out the details of the story, so he hoped Dora could volunteer some bits to it here and there. “I knew she was betrothed tae Trevor, sae I thought naught o’ it, other than tae wish them happy.”

So far, so good. “Earlier this summer, I found I had business tae conduct in York. I came down from my estate near Aberfoyle in Stirling, bringing a horse for me tae ride along the way. And well,” Finn shook his head, “the rest rivals Shakespeare’s *Comedy o’ Errors*. One day, I’m not quite certain how, the coachman got completely lost and we ended up near Brompton. When he stopped for directions, I elected tae ride, sae I sent the carriage ahead tae York. I was taking a short cut, directed by Mrs. Jameson at The Green Tree Inn, and my horse put his foot in a hole. Flipped me end over teacup intae a ditch.” He hoped Dora would chime in any time now to make this thin tale a bit more probable. Finn nudged her hand. “And that is when...”

“That is when I found him.” Dora smiled at him, and Finn blessed her once more. She rose to the occasion beautifully. “Gretchen and I were out riding, and the horse shied at something that turned out to be Finn. I managed to get him home on Gretchen then I had the doctor fetched, who pronounced him sound save for a sprained ankle.” Dora seemed to warm to her tale. “When he came to—I will tell you he hates *sal volatile* even more than I do—he turned out to be Tris’s friend I had met last year.”

“And they say coincidences never actually happen.” Trevor’s voice dripped with sarcasm, but at least the man seemed willing to go along with the scheme. For now.

“Go on, Dora. I am fascinated at how you and Lord Aberfoyle have been brought together.” Violet smiled broadly at Dora. “Almost as if the Fates had taken a hand in it, don’t you think?”

The duchess looked around the room at all of them, her stern face softening a measure. “It certainly does sound fortuitous, doesn’t it? Although I suppose stranger things have happened. I would never have met my husband

had I not eaten some bad lobster patties at a ball.” The duchess chuckled. “I had to run out into the garden to cast up my accounts. Ostroda found me out there, wretchedly ill, and assisted me so easily, without any embarrassment at all, that I fell in love with him on the spot.” She nodded her head so vehemently the feathers on her hat waggled. “I am the Duchess of Ostroda only because Lady Hawthorne happened to serve bad fish to her guests.” Tapping her cane on the floor, she nodded. “Proceed.”

“Well,” Dora seemed a bit steadier now, “as I said, I brought Finn here and had the doctor fetched. He pronounced a sprained ankle and said it could take a month or more for it to heal.” She squeezed Finn’s hand, sending his heart rate soaring. “Before the month was scarcely begun, we knew we were in love.”

“Imagine that.” Lord Trevor apparently could not help himself from contributing snide remarks.

“We took my carriage and made a dash tae Gretna Green.” Finn lifted Dora’s hand and placed a kiss on it. “We were married over the anvil o’ a blacksmith’s shop about a month or sae ago.” He grinned at the duchess. “Sae although we were without benefit o’ clergy, we are married just the same. When we heard that Lord and Lady Trevor had arrived in the county, we invited them here for dinner and had agreed tae wait until we gentlemen joined the ladies after dinner tae announce our nuptials.”

“Do you see now, aunt, that I cannot obey my father’s wishes, even if I wanted to?” Dora’s plaintive voice would have touched the hardest heart. “What do you say, Aunt Mimi? Will we have your support against my father when he hears about my marriage?”

“Well,” the duchess stared first at Finn then turned her gaze on her

niece. "I will have many questions for the two of you later," she wagged her finger back and forth between him and Dora, "and some of my words may not be quite fit for Polite Society, but I do have one thing to say at present, Dora." She went from face to face, her stern visage singling out each of them before pronouncing, "For this to be a true celebration, you must break out the champagne."

Chapter 18

“I must say,” the Duchess of Ostroda said as she sipped her champagne, “I am actually relieved that you are so handily taken care of, Dora, and at last beyond your father’s power. Melchior has been out of control ever since your brother died. You know of his latest scheme to marry your niece to a man three times her age, do you not?”

“Yes, aunt. Judith recounted the whole sordid story to me.” Dora sighed. She wished she truly was beyond her father’s power to control her. “However, as it all has turned out well for Judith and Anna, I am very happy for her and her new husband.” She turned to Violet, who was making a face at the drink in her hand. “You would like him very much, Violet. He is truly a kind gentleman. Is something the matter?”

“The bubbles are tickling my nose. I keep wanting to sneeze.”

Everyone laughed, and the room seemed to relax. Unfortunately, from the look on Tris’s tense face, the fireworks were scarcely over.

“Aunt Mimi, you must be tired. If you like, I can have Mrs. Carlyle show you to your room. Let me ring for Hanson. Did you bring Marcella with you?”

“You know I would never step the first foot on a journey without her.” Marcella was her aunt’s lady’s maid of twenty years. At least her aunt would have everything settled just as she liked when she retired. After all this excitement, she would need a good rest.

And once her aunt was out of the room, she and Finn could hopefully allay any fears Tris and Violet might have. She assumed there would be many.

"I believe I will go up now." Her playful glare rested on her and Finn. "I've had all the excitement I can stand for one evening. Although do not think I will not have an interview with you two in the morning." She nodded vehemently.

"We will await it with light hearts, Duchess." Finn smiled his brightest at her. "There is naught we willna answer for ye."

If only that were true.

Aunt Mimi rose. "I will see you both in the morning, then. Lord Trevor, Lady Trevor, good evening. I suppose I must expect excitement to be *de rigueur* wherever you are to be found."

"It would seem that way, Duchess." Tris bowed, his smile warm and charming. "I look forward to another escapade when we next meet."

"So pleased to see you again, Duchess." Violet curtsied then subtly elbowed her husband.

The door opened, and Hanson appeared. "Yes, Miss Harper?"

Her aunt turned to her, a black frown marring her face. "Why does your butler still address you as Miss Harper, Dora?"

A sickening roiling in her stomach made Dora hope when she cast up her accounts all over her aunt it would create enough of a diversion for her to think of an answer.

But Finn stepped forward and whispered something in Aunt Mimi's ear.

Her aunt's face cleared instantly. "Ah, I see. Very well."

Amazed and intrigued, Dora turned to the butler. "Hanson, please show the duchess to her room and ask Mrs. Carlyle to make sure she has everything she requires."

"Of course, miss. Duchess." He led Aunt Mimi out and shut the door.

There was a moment of silence as she turned back to face the others.

"Have you two lost your minds?" Tris's voice boomed so loudly she prayed Aunt Mimi couldn't hear it down the corridor.

Dora rushed to Finn's side, afraid Tris might actually try to throttle him. "Can you please lower your voice and act in a civil manner?" she hissed at him.

"How did you ever concoct such an unbelievable, ridiculous, brainless story?" Tris strode to the sideboard and splashed a good third of the decanter of cognac into a tumbler.

"'Twas spur o' the moment, Trevor." Finn looked at Dora, a warm, approving light in his eyes. "Ye were magnificent, *mo chridhe*. Genius, in fact."

"But what has it gotten you?" Tris's voice rose again as he strode back toward them. "You've lied to the duchess, and presumably she will take that lie to Dora's father. Then he'll come up here himself to throw you out or worse. And when he finds out about your little deceit, Dora will be the one to bear the brunt of his rightful anger, as Aberfoyle will be long gone by that time."

"What it gains us, Trevor, is time." Finn raised his chin and stared into Tris's haughty face. "Until he learns the truth, he canna press for this marriage tae Sir Harry. I will have time tae go tae London, take care o' this scurrilous business with Scarlet then journey on tae Wiltshire and ask for Dora's hand properly."

"You're going to do what?" Trevor's eyes bulged.

"I want tae court Dora." He grinned at her. "I took yer words today

about yer father's reaction as a challenge."

She stared at Finn, heart pounding in his chest so hard she believed the others could hear it. Happiness washing over her, she grasped Violet's hands, squeezing her fingers with sheer joy.

Coolly, Finn turned his attention back to Trevor. "Why would ye find that sae astonishing? Just yesterday ye said ye'd make sure I married her if her reputation was at stake." Finn shrugged. "I'm saving ye the trouble o' forcing me tae it."

"You said you'd *force* him to marry me, Tris?" Dora swung around from Violet, scowling so hard her face hurt. "How dare you insinuate that you have any say in my life whatsoever?"

"If your reputation were disparaged because of Aberfoyle's actions, you bloody well would marry him." Trevor looked fit to be tied by the double attack.

"So ye approve o' our marrying, then?" Finn grinned as he heaped flaming coals on Tris's head.

"No!" Throwing up his hands, Trevor stalked back to the sideboard and poured a generous drink.

Finn gave her a quick smile and followed the weary man across the room. "Ye canna have it both ways, man. Either ye think we should marry or ye dinna."

"It's not that bloody black and white, and you know it," Trevor growled but poured Finn a glass of her best port.

"I ken I love the lady. If I'm able tae take care o' her, isn't that enough for ye?"

Stunned, Dora could think of nothing else. He loved her. He'd

actually said the words. Dora grasped Violet's hand, her heart swelling with happiness.

"How can you tell you love her? You've only known her two days."

"Romeo and Juliet fell in love at first sight." Grinning at Trevor, whose face darkened with each passing minute, Finn poured himself another drink.

"And look how well that turned out."

"I dinna care if ye approve or no', Trevor." By his tone, Finn seemed to have had enough of his lordship. "I'll be asking Miss Harper's father for his blessing, not ye."

"And you expect to receive it from Lord Downing?" Tris scoffed at him. "You are either mad or a fool. If you attempt to deceive Downing or thwart his wishes in any way, you'll have a better chance of marrying the newly widowed Empress Catherine of Russia than Dora."

"Surely not, Tris." Violet spoke up from the sofa. "Lord Aberfoyle is an earl, and a very eligible *parti*. Wouldn't Lord Downing wish her to marry as advantageously as possible?"

"You do not know him as I do, my love. He will go to any lengths to best whoever tries to usurp his power." He nodded at Finn and Dora. "They have just sealed their fate to never be married, unless they wait until Dora reaches her majority. If you can fend your father off for two more years."

"If Lord Downing willna see reason," Finn walked back to the sofa and slipped his arm around Dora's shoulders, the feeling warm and secure, "then we will make our lie the truth. After I resolve the issue o' my arrest, I will return here with my uncle, and Dora and I will journey tae Aberfoyle and marry in Scotland."

“Who is this uncle of whom you speak, Aberfoyle?” Tris emptied his glass. “You conjure him up so frequently, as you would a talisman, I begin to wonder if he is real as well.”

“Och, he is as real as ye or I, Trevor. The Marquess of Abernethy.” Finn pronounced the name as though it were sacred. “My mother’s brother and a very powerful man in Scotland.”

Tris nodded and looked more respectfully at Finn. “I’ve met him. A shrewd man and a good orator. Very canny in the Lords. You certainly have excellent connections if Abernethy’s your uncle.” He stood, stroking his chin. “I’m not certain that his name might not pique Lord Downing’s interest. The better connected you are, the more likely Downing will see a way to exploit it. And therefore allow your marriage.”

“Then we should set out tomorrow at first light, Finn,” Dora spoke up. The sooner they found Lord Abernethy, the sooner these uncertainties would be resolved. They had to get Finn’s name cleared before anything else could happen.

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Finn and Tris said together.

“I shall accompany Finn to London in my carriage, posing as his wife. Then, as soon as we find his uncle and have his name cleared, we can—”

“Go no further, Dora.” Tris looked as though any patience he may have possessed had evaporated long ago. “You will not compromise yourself irrevocably by posing as Aberfoyle’s wife. By the slimmest of chances, you have escaped censure here. Once you leave this house, you will be subjected to the scrutiny of all manner of people, who will ruin you with one well-placed *on-dit* in London. It cannot happen.”

“I believe Trevor speaks the truth, my love.” Finn took her hand. “For

the self-same reason. Yer reputation will be in shambles, and ye will never recover from it. I will return for ye, *leannan*. I swear it.” He stroked her cheek, his touch light as a butterfly’s. “I swear it on my life.”

“No.” Dora glared first at Tris then at Finn. They were not going to browbeat her into submission. She’d made her plan, and now she would stick to it. “Violet and I were discussing this very plan when we were interrupted by Aunt Mimi. I declare I will not be parted from Finn. To that end, we will journey to London together as man and wife. Scarlet and his men will not be looking for a carriage, especially one with a man and a woman in it. It will be the best way to throw them off Finn’s trail.” She looked at them defiantly. “Unless you have a better plan.”

“I think you may need to alter *your* plan, Dora.” Violet, who had been silent all this time, spoke quietly from the sofa. “You must see that your aunt’s presence changes things.”

Of course, Aunt Mimi’s arrival would make their immediate departure most peculiar. She couldn’t abandon her aunt at the estate, but neither would she agree to remain behind. There must be some way for her and Finn to travel together without raising her aunt’s suspicions. “What if we waited a few more days then traveled to London with my aunt?” This scheme had possibilities. Dora’s mood brightened. “We simply say that Finn has business in London, and we can travel together, Aunt Mimi in her carriage and us in mine.”

“Out of the question.” Tris’s words sounded before she’d gotten her last word out.

“And why not, grumpy goose?” His gainsaying any idea she came up with had gotten more than tiresome.

“Because if you are posing as husband and wife, you will be expected to share a single room.” Crossing his arms over his chest, Tris looked more forbidding than ever. “Dora’s reputation will be in absolute tatters.”

Dora turned to Finn, her heart suddenly racing. Ever since their kiss, she’d allowed herself once or twice to think about what it might be like to be married to Finn.

Her faux husband, however, glanced away from her gaze. “Is something wrong?” she whispered.

“Aye,” he growled back, “but no’ with ye.”

“What?”

Finn merely shook his head and shifted his stance.

Dragging her attention back to Tristan, Dora continued her argument. “I do not see a problem, Tris. Once Finn’s business is sorted out, if we can be married as quickly as possible, will it truly matter? I cannot imagine that you and Violet waited until the minister pronounced you man and wife.”

“Dora!” Violet gasped.

“That was uncalled for, Dora.” Tris tried to scowl, but the effect was spoiled by his pink-tinged cheeks.

“Yet you do not deny it, Tris.” Dora didn’t mean to embarrass her friends, but why would they hold her and Finn to a different standard?

“Even if it were true, it is still beside the point. I cannot condone such behavior.” Her former fiancé was taking his role as protector to extremes, which was sweet but very inconvenient at the moment.

“I have a suggestion that may suit everyone.” Violet’s tone was more forceful this time. Her brows had come down in a delicate frown that made her look uncommonly fierce. “Tell the duchess the truth, Dora.”

“What?” Dora exchanged glances with Finn, who looked equally startled. “Why?”

“So that Dora can accompany Finn to London.”

Finn cocked his head, as though considering her words. “How does that help the situation?”

Violet smiled and patted the place next to her. Reluctantly, Dora sat. “If you confess your story to your aunt, but tell her the whole true story, I believe she will still be an ally for your intent to marry. She did not seem very sanguine about your father’s scheme of the arranged marriage, and she seems to approve of Lord Aberfoyle very much.”

“Please, my lady,” Finn broke in, “after ye’ve assisted Dora and me sae much, I beg ye tae call me Finn as Dora does.”

“With pleasure, Finn. If you will call me Violet, as Dora does.”

Finn turned to Tris, eyebrow raised. “Am I allowed this familiarity, my lord?”

“My husband does not control which of my friends I allow to address me by my name, Finn.” She stared at him evenly.

“Begging yer pardon, my lady, but I’d prefer no’ tae meet yer husband at dawn.” He glanced at Tris then back at Violet. “I have sae many other methods o’ swift death currently at my disposal.”

“If she has no objection to the familiar address, Aberfoyle, neither do I.” A smile puckered Tristan’s mouth. “However, do not suppose that I will offer a similar invitation for myself.”

Finn chuckled. “I would never expect it, my lord. Violet, please continue with yer version o’ the plan. After we confess the truth about our situation, what next?”

“You must ask the duchess to act as chaperone on your journey to London. She will be returning there shortly, so you will not discommode her. And her presence in the carriage will fulfill the expectation of propriety very nicely. The two ladies will have their own room, and you yours. As for Lieutenant Scarlet, he will be searching for a man on horseback or a single man or even a man and woman in a carriage. There is nothing to make him suspicious of two women and a gentleman traveling to London together.”

“I have to say I think it will serve.” Tris leaned against the sideboard, his face relaxed for the first time that evening. “It takes everything into account, from confessing to the false marriage, to Aberfoyle’s reason for going to London, to the need for a chaperone for the enamored couple.”

Finn took Dora’s hand. “It will be difficult tae tell yer aunt that we lied tae her, but I believe Violet’s plan is a sound one. What dae ye think, *leannan*?”

Disappointed that she would not have the opportunity to share more than a stolen kiss or two with Finn during the journey, Dora still had to agree that the plan should work. “We should tell Aunt Mimi at breakfast and get the unpleasantness over with. Then we can plan our journey in earnest.”

“And Violet and I can return to our home and await your letter telling us of your progress with getting the charges dismissed.” Relief made Tris’s gaze at his wife even more loving. “We will be glad to sleep in the same bed for more than one or two nights.”

“No’ that I think there will be much sleep going on,” Finn whispered in Dora’s ear, making her gasp with laughter.

“Hush.” She batted at his arm. “Behave.”

“No’ when I’m around ye.”

Her cheeks heating, Dora rose. “Shall we say good night, then? Will we see you at breakfast, my dears?”

Slipping his wife’s arm through his, Tris grinned at them. “Oh, we would not miss the spectacle of your confession to the duchess. I await the morning eagerly.”

“Good night, Dora. Good night, Finn.” Violet strolled from the room, arm in arm with her husband.

Dora sighed as they left. If only Finn would look at her with the love Tris had for Violet, she would be happy until the end of her days. However, she must be patient. They had been together but little as of yet. Love as deep and true as she wished for took time and perhaps a trial by fire to bring it forth. Now they would have more time together to affect a deepening regard for one another.

They emerged into the corridor and turned toward her chamber.

“One thing I’d like to know, Finn.”

“Name it, *m’eudail*.” He raised her hand to his lips.

“What did you tell Aunt Mimi as to why the servants still called me by my maiden name?” That had been the biggest flaw in their clapped-together story.

“I merely told her that we had instructed the servants tae continue tae call ye Miss Harper and no’ Lady Aberfoyle because we had no’ announced the marriage tae the world yet. Once it was announced, ye would be called by yer proper title, my lady.”

They stopped before her chamber door.

“What will your wife’s proper title be, Finn?” She’d not even thought about the fact that should they wed, she would have a title, like her mother

had.

“Ye will be the Countess o’ Aberfoyle, called Lady Aberfoyle by servants and peers alike. For now, however, you are almost a countess.” Finn glanced down the corridor, but there was no one in sight. Quick as lightning, he sank his mouth onto hers.

Dora hadn’t been expecting it, but she took full advantage, pressing back, reveling in the closeness between them that seemed to ignite fires throughout her body. He pulled her against him and a hardness down below both startled and excited her. Finn did desire her—more than a little, from the feel of it. Hopefully, in not so very much longer, they could indulge in more than stolen kisses. Much more.

At last, Finn broke the kiss with a groan. “If I dinna stop noo, I willna stop at all, *mo chridhe*.” He stepped back. “I want ye enough tae want tae wait, tae make our first night together as perfect as it can be.”

“I understand, Finn.” She didn’t necessarily agree, but if he wished to wait for them to wed, she supposed she could have restraint as well. “It won’t be long, though, will it?”

“Nae, my love.” He stared deeply into her eyes, and a thrill raced through Dora. He looked at her with a hunger she’d never seen, a look of desire beyond any she’d ever experienced. Her knees weakened, and she was glad she could lean back against the wall. Finn bent his head to taste her lips again, whispering, “No’ very long at all.”

Chapter 19

Confession might be good for the soul, but in Dora's opinion, the person responsible for that old adage hadn't taken into account the secular repercussions. With foreboding, she and Finn presented themselves and confessed their deception to her aunt in the morning room directly after breakfast, with the added audience of Violet and Tris.

To Dora's dismay, Aunt Mimi had gone quickly from stunned silence to very vocal indignation.

"I am shocked and utterly dismayed at your cavalier attitude toward telling the truth, Dora." Aunt Mimi fixed her with a baleful eye that made Dora want to squirm in her seat as though she were five and had been caught sneaking sweets from the kitchen. "And you, Lord Aberfoyle, have behaved even more shockingly. Not only have you attempted to deceive me, but you have come amazingly close to ruining my niece's reputation and tricking me into condoning the behavior. What on earth were you thinking?"

Finn had met her aunt's scowling face with frank honesty. "I believe I thought only o' yer niece, Duchess. O' how much we've come tae care for one another, and that the only way I can ask tae court her is if my name is cleared. Tae that end, I must journey tae London noo. I couldna wait as Dora's father gave her in marriage tae another, sae tae give me time tae ask for her hand, I said we were already wed. Noo, the most expeditious way for us tae accomplish this is tae have ye serve as chaperone and traveling companion on the way tae London. Then, once my name is cleared, we can go tae Wiltshire." He looked at Dora, a softness coming into his eyes. "I tried tae dissuade her, but she insisted on accompanying me tae provide a safeguard

should Lieutenant Scarlet happen upon the carriage. He wilna be searching for a couple, and certainly no' for a party o' three persons."

"Aunt Mimi, we were wrong to lie to you, but we are desperate." Grasping her aunt's hands, she sent a prayer up to the Almighty to sway the woman's mind. "We have had very little time together. Don't you think we deserve to have a little more?" Her aunt sat, unmoved, and Dora wracked her brain for an argument that might sway her. "And just think, Aunt Mimi. If you and I travel with Finn, if the soldiers find him, I cannot help but think we can dissuade them from harming him further, at the very least. We can make sure if he's recaptured, he will have a fair trial." Dora didn't even want to consider the possibility of Finn being in the hands of those merciless men once more. She shuddered and pushed the thought aside. "Please, please won't you help us?"

"By rights, I should turn you over to the authorities myself, young man." Glaring at Finn, Aunt Mimi raised her teacup and took a long, deliberate sip, dragging out the moment as long as she could.

Frantic, Dora held her breath—her aunt had ever been as good as her word. From long experience, if Aunt Mimi decided to summon Lieutenant Scarlet, there would be no changing her mind.

"However," her aunt set her cup down, "I have always had a soft spot in my heart for young couples facing adversity." Aunt Mimi pursed her lips. "And you two seem to be facing more than most. Between your impending incarceration, Lord Aberfoyle, and your father's determination to saddle you with a middle-aged husband, Dora, I do see that if you are to have any chance at happiness, I must step in."

"Thank you so much, Aunt—"

“Do not thank me yet, child.” Her aunt’s face remained stern. “In order for me to help you, I have several stipulations to which you must agree, or I will not lift a finger.”

“Name them, Duchess.” Finn sat forward eagerly. “I promise ye we will follow them tae the absolute letter.”

Aunt Mimi fixed him with a cool look that sent a chill down Dora’s spine. “You may wish to consider the conditions I require before agreeing to them so blindly, my lord.”

Unabashedly, Finn grinned at her. “If it means in the end, Dora and I will be together, I would make a deal with the devil himself. Nae offense tae ye, Duchess.”

“None taken, young man.” Aunt Mimi smiled. “You might, however, prefer the devil’s deal to mine.”

Dora exchanged a look with Finn and shook her head. These conditions would definitely not be to their liking. “What are your conditions, aunt?”

“First and foremost, you two will have no private contact whatsoever.” Aunt Mimi’s gaze rested directly on Dora. “No hand holding, no kissing, and absolutely no physical intimacy at all during the journey.”

Not an unexpected demand, although Dora had held out hope of her and Finn deepening their courtship in some of those ways. With a sigh, she nodded. “I promise to abide by those rules, Aunt Mimi.”

Finn’s sigh was exactly the same, but he answered, “I promise as well, Duchess.”

“Good. The other condition concerns my belief that simply posing as Dora’s husband will not serve nearly as well to deceive the lieutenant as a

more intricate disguise.”

Dora glanced at Finn and shrugged. What better scheme had her aunt hit upon to conceal Finn’s identity? “What disguise is that?”

Smiling broadly, Aunt Mimi said, “I propose Lord Aberfoyle take on the appearance of an actual friend of mine, Mrs. Helena Devereaux.”

“Mrs. Devereaux?” It took Dora a moment to understand her aunt correctly. “You want Finn to dress as a woman?”

“Ye want me tae dae what?” The stunned expression on Finn’s face would have been quite comical had the situation not been so desperate.

Still, Dora had to smother a smile at her beloved’s wide-staring eyes, raised eyebrows, and dropped jaw.

“If you prefer to take the devil’s deal, I will understand, my lord.” Her aunt’s devilish sense of humor had never been so apparent.

Finn gulped. “Are ye quite sure that’s no’ the devil’s deal?”

“But Finn...” Why was he being stubborn about this? “This disguise won’t be very different from wearing a kilt, will it?”

Aunt Mimi gave a bark of laughter.

Finn sent Dora a withering look. “Aye, it will.”

“Please, Finn?” She put every ounce of pleading into her voice. He simply had to agree. “You promised.”

Finn looked from Aunt Mimi to Dora and back again and sighed. “Devil take it.” Finn’s face was a study, as though caught squarely between Scylla and Charybdis. “Very well.” He eyed Dora then nodded to her aunt. “Under great duress, I have decided tae accept the offer o’ yer carriage, Duchess. And all its attendant conditions. I only hope ye’ve a spare bum roll about ye.”

Even with that battle won, there were several delays that tried Dora's soul.

First was Aunt Mimi's insistence that she must have more than one day of rest after the grueling five-day journey she'd just endured before attempting it yet again. Her original plan had been to stay with Dora for a month before venturing back to London. Finn's plight, however, had put paid to that plan. Her aunt had agreed they would venture out as quickly as possible, but in the end, they remained at Bromley for a week while her aunt rested and Finn was outfitted with several gowns, a wig, and a hat for his disguise.

Marcella proved a wonder at altering the gowns Dora's mother had left at the estate some years before. She also restyled her father's gray wig into a more feminine coiffure and at last, on the first day of September, Dora, Aunt Mimi, and Finn set out for London. They rode in style in the grand ducal carriage that Dora's aunt took everywhere with her. The intrepid Marcella and Larkin followed behind with the luggage in Dora's small, plain carriage.

She and Aunt Mimi sat on the forward-facing plush leather seat in the palatial carriage, the interior a pleasant cream color. Finn sat in the backward facing seat, decked out in a blue jacquard gown, trimmed in ecru lace. The ensemble was finished with a delicate mobcap worn atop the newly styled gray wig. It had been quite disturbing for Dora to see the man she loved dressed in her mother's clothing, looking like a passable imitation of her parent. But if he could stand to wear it, she could stand to see it.

"In the end, Lord Aberfoyle, what made you decide to agree to my conditions?" Aunt Mimi cocked her head at him, although she glanced at Dora as well.

“Dora did, Yer Grace.” He shot a rueful look at her, and Dora smiled back. “She reminded me that I had promised tae accept the terms, nae matter what. If I get Dora as my wife in the end, then what’s a little… embarrassment?” “

“Well spoken, my lord.” Aunt Mimi settled back in the butter-soft leather seats. “If your adventure ends well, I shall have something to say to Lord Downing on your behalf.” Closing her eyes, Aunt Mimi immediately began to snore gently.

Quietly, Finn took Dora’s hand in his. “How dae women put up with all these confounded clothes?” He pulled at his bodice, which had been amply stuffed, making his bosom appear lopsided so he punched it back into place, sending Dora into a fit of giggles. “I suppose if one is willing tae suffer for love o’ another, one is often rewarded.”

“And what will be your reward, my love?” He’d overcome some strange personal aversion to wearing women’s clothing just so they could be together on this journey. She’d love to give him something in return.

He gazed deeply into her eyes. “My ring on yer finger, love, is the only reward I seek.”

The day was hot for the beginning of September, so Lieutenant Geoffrey Scarlet was glad to call a halt when they reached The Green Tree Inn in the village of Brompton. He’d had to head a little off the main road from Leeds to get here, but he deemed it well worth the extra time. They’d visited the inn several times while searching for the accursed Scot and while Mrs. Jameson wasn’t the most cordial of hostesses, her cakes and ale were some of the best he’d encountered. “Dismount. We’ll give Mrs. Jameson our custom

one last time then head toward the Great North Road.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Gates, the first man on the ground, looped his reins around the post and bolted into the inn. The rest of the men followed suit, leaving Scarlet alone to brood.

After a week of fruitless searching in and around Leeds, they were headed back to Edinburgh with nothing to show for the past few weeks except empty hands. Scarlet wasn’t sure how his superiors would take the news that he’d lost the treasonous Scotsman, save it would not be with welcoming arms. Considering the only information he’d sent his commanding officer, just after he’d arrested Aberfoyle, had been he was heading to Edinburgh with a prisoner, he might be able to spin a tale in which the loss of said prisoner wasn’t his fault but one of his men’s. Either way, this had been a right fiasco from the beginning and there would surely be a reckoning for him when he finally returned to the garrison.

Scarlet dismounted, hitched his horse to the iron post in front of the inn—still grateful to have found Conqueror after the bastard had taken him—and strode into the establishment. His men had taken a table at the far end, and a barmaid was already distributing pints to them all.

“Mrs. Jameson.” He removed his hat and nodded to the inn’s owner. “Cakes and ale for my men.”

“Good day, lieutenant.” The lady gave him one brief nod. “I hadn’t seen you in a week or more. Thought you’d left us for good already.”

Certain the woman had wished it true, Scarlet shook his head, a scowl on his face. “If only that were so. Unfortunately, Leeds proved as disappointing as this godforsaken hamlet.”

She eyed him and pursed her lips. “From the look of you, you’re no

better off than before you left.”

“As you see no prisoner with us, your observation is uncommonly astute, madam.” Scarlet snared a pint from the passing barmaid’s tray, took a long pull, and sighed.

“You’re movin’ on, then, lieutenant?” Relief showed in the woman’s face.

“As soon as we partake of your cakes and quench our thirst, we are heading back to our billet in Scotland.” He had to work hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“Then I wish you all a safe journey, lieutenant.” With the first genuine smile he’d had from her, Mrs. Jameson headed to the kitchen and returned with a tray of the sugary cakes. “Help yourselves.”

Scarlet grabbed two before she continued over to the table and the eager faces of his men.

The bell above the door rang as a gentleman Scarlet didn’t know entered and strode to the bar beside him. “Good day to you, Mrs. Jameson. Have you a bit of the cottage pie for me today?”

“Good day, Mr. Cardrew,” Mrs. Jameson called as she turned from the soldiers’ table, her tray completely empty. “Take your seat, and I’ll bring it to you.”

Turning to let his gaze follow the man as he made his way to a table by the window, Scarlet sipped his ale and frowned. Somehow, he’d missed interrogating this man, although his name rang a distant bell. He turned back to the bar as Mrs. Jameson hurried behind it. “Mrs. Jameson, that gentleman who just came in, who is he?”

“Mr. Cardrew? He’s the surgeon what serves the village and the

people hereabouts. A nice gentleman. He's not married, so he comes here most days for a bite of something so he's no need to cook." The innkeeper headed into the kitchen and emerged almost immediately with a steaming plate filled with mashed potatoes, beef, and gravy that smelled wonderful and carried it to the table.

Mr. Cardrew dug into the mound of food with such gusto Scarlet wished he had time to enjoy a plate before they had to go. So this was the doctor Miss Harper had called to her father. Had the gentleman truly had the smallpox? Geoffrey had checked himself each evening before retiring for any signs of the red spots, but he'd found none and felt fit as a flea. Perhaps Mr. Harper had actually had a different ailment.

Without further thought, Geoffrey took his glass and sauntered over to the man. "Mr. Cardrew? Lieutenant Geoffrey Scarlet. May I have a word, sir?"

Mouth full of pie, the physician indicated the bench seat across the table from him. Once he swallowed, he said, "How can I help you, lieutenant?"

"As my men and I were searching for an escaped prisoner, I had occasion to visit a Miss Harper on her estate at Bromley almost a fortnight ago. Her father was very ill, and she said you suspected smallpox. I simply wondered if the gentleman has recovered?" Geoffrey certainly hoped so, for his own sake. "Or if perhaps he was afflicted with some other malady?"

His mouth full again, Cardrew chewed slowly, gazing at Geoffrey with a puzzled look on his face. He washed his pie down with a swallow of ale and shook his head. "I'm sorry, lieutenant, but I'm afraid you've gotten the household confused with another you've called upon." The surgeon wiped

his lips and nodded. "I was called to Miss Harper's estate to tend to a patient, however it was not her father. Lord Downing has not been in residence in York at all this year, I believe. He comes very seldom."

A sinking feeling in his stomach made Geoffrey clutch his glass. "Who were you summoned to attend?"

"A cousin of Miss Harper, a Mr. Bowman who was traveling north to Scotland when he took a fall from his horse." Cardrew waved his hand. "A very slight sprain of the ankle. He's likely already on his way."

The ale in Geoffrey's stomach was now threatening to make another appearance. "Can you tell me what Mr. Bowman looks like?"

Cardrew frowned as he picked up his fork again. "A young man in his twenties, I expect. I'm not certain about his height as he was lying down when I saw him, but I'd say your height, perhaps. A good, strong physique." The doctor frowned as he put a forkful of the pie in his mouth. "Dark red hair. Do you know him?"

Geoffrey slammed the glass down on the table, shattering it. Ale flew everywhere as he leaped up, bellowing, "Damnation! Everyone in the saddle now!"

Out the door at a run, Geoffrey slowed to jerk the reins loose and leap onto the horse's back. Not even waiting for the others, he kicked the horse into a canter and tore down the road.

Minutes later, Newcomb, whose horse had won several races back at Fort William, pulled alongside him. "Lieutenant, what's happened? Where are we going?"

"Miss Harper's estate. The bitch lied to us. Aberfoyle is there. Or was." Geoffrey ground his teeth and urged the horse into a gallop. He'd have a

talk with Miss Harper, oh yes, he would. And if the treasonous Scot wasn't to be found, he'd make certain the cunning jilt told him where the whoreson had gone, no matter what he had to do to assure her cooperation.

Chapter 20

After a tedious day of riding in clothes that chafed and itched in all the wrong places, Finn had never been so glad to see the carriage sweep into the yard of The Red Lion in Doncaster. The thought of four more such days on the road had him reconsidering the merits of his disguise for the past hour, but for the moment, the prospect of shedding these uncomfortable clothes for a nightshirt of his own was extremely appealing. Of course, he'd still need to continue the disguise through dinner, but that was easily done with the freedom to come within sight.

The duchess and Dora had already descended from the carriage, so Finn gathered his skirts and held his breath. Earlier at one of their stops to change horses, he'd tripped going down the steps, ending up in the arms of the startled coachman. Finn prayed for better balance and emerged from the door. The driver grasped his arm, and Finn managed, more or less gracefully, to descend the two steps. He grinned and said in a high falsetto, "Thank ye, Marks," before joining Dora and her aunt as they turned to enter the inn.

Another thing Finn had to get used to was that the duchess, and not he, was in charge. At the first coaching inn they stopped at, he'd naturally started into the inn to order drinks for them, but the duchess had stopped him, her hand like iron on his wrist.

"Mrs. Devereaux, allow me, my dear. You are *my* guest, after all. I will arrange the refreshments for the three of us." Her glare would have made a general cower.

Finn nodded, chagrined. "O' course, Duchess. Ye are too kind."

After that he'd had to school his impulses to take the lead whenever

they stopped. Pretending to be a woman gave one an education like no other.

Now on firm ground at the day's end, Finn luxuriated in stretching his legs as they headed into The Red Lion. The servants' carriage had already arrived, so their accommodations should have been readied for them. He for one would be happy to be able to undress and indulge in being a male once more. He glanced toward Dora. The only other thing he could ask for would be some time to speak with her alone.

Their conversation throughout the day had been strained. The duchess's presence meant they could speak of nothing more intimate than the weather or the health of her parents, so they were treated to the duchess's recounting of Dora's sister-in-law's marriage and the nefarious schemes of Dora's father. However, after so many hours in Dora's presence, he wanted nothing more than the opportunity to talk to her about anything that did not include her family or how extraordinary the heat was this time of year. They had given their word not to kiss or indulge in other intimacies, not even the innocent hand-holding engaged couples were allowed. He'd noted, however, that they had not been forbidden to converse privately. He certainly didn't have much hope of Dora sneaking away for any length of time so they could speak candidly, but a few minutes after dinner might be possible.

He and Dora followed in the duchess's wake as she called for the innkeeper and made certain the rooms were to her liking. "I hope my servants were quite clear in my requirements, my good man."

The proprietor, a Mr. Osborne, nodded his head so quickly Finn could have sworn he felt a breeze. "Yes, Your Grace. They gave me strict specifications, and I believe The Red Lion has met them all for you." He started up a flight of stairs on the far wall, followed by their little procession.

“Just this way. I’ll show you up.”

Finn brought up the rear, again watching his step. Though both men and women’s dress shoes had high heels, they balanced differently, as he’d found to his dismay earlier. And with his ankle still tender, he didn’t wish to turn it and aggravate it again.

Osborne led them toward the back of the establishment and opened the last door on the right. “This is our best chamber and parlor combination, Your Grace. It overlooks the woods,” he gestured to the good-sized window that did indeed have several trees growing right next to it, “so it is nice and quiet during the night.” He moved to a door on the right and opened it onto a spacious parlor. “This room should serve all your needs for meals or entertainment this evening.” He looked expectantly at the duchess.

“This will do nicely, Mr. Osborne. I thank you.” The duchess nodded her head graciously, the ostrich plumb in her hat waving regally. “Now, where will Mrs. Devereaux lodge?”

“This way, Your Grace.” He returned to the corridor and led them back toward the stairs. “If this chamber is acceptable to the lady,” Osborne opened a door to a smaller bedroom, but Finn nodded happily, for the room had a large double bed and looked out on the woods as well.

“I will be very comfortable here, Mr. Osborne. Thank ye, Duchess, for yer good care o’ me.” He smiled at her and nodded to the innkeeper. “Might I get hot water and a bathtub fetched? Traveling is sae wearing on one.”

“Of course, of course.” The little man nodded quickly again and continued down the corridor. “Your servants will be lodged here...” Mr. Osborne led the duchess away, but Finn waited a split second before grasping Dora’s arm and hauling her back into the room.

“Oh.” She staggered toward him, her eyes wide but sparkling with excitement. “I must go to Aunt Mimi. She’ll be calling for me in a moment.”

“Then give me that moment, I beg o’ ye, my love.” He pulled her closer, so the heady scent of roses enveloped him. “I’ve hungered for a private word with ye all day. Like sitting down tae a feast and being forbidden tae sample even one dish.”

“Then you’d best take your taste now, love.” She lifted her lips to him, and he willingly took the offering.

Sweet and soft, her mouth aroused him instantly.

“Dora!” The duchess sounded close, and they jumped apart.

“Can ye sneak away tae walk with me after dinner?” He brought her hand to his lips. “But a few minutes’ walk together this evening might help ease the longing to be with ye a wee bit.”

“I will try.” She squeezed his hand then darted out the door. “Coming, Aunt Mimi.”

Thank goodness for the concealing nature of his skirts. They hid well his advanced state of arousal, although he couldn’t wait to shed them, along with the false identity, and meet Dora as a man once more.

He relaxed his shoulders and sat at the dressing table to make some little repairs to his lip pomade. Dora was wearing as much of it now as he. If he closed his eyes, he could almost feel the touch of her lips on his, making his hunger for her soar. With a sigh, he opened them and hurriedly twisted the cap on the cosmetics jar. He’d need to avoid such indulgences if he wished to keep his word to the duchess.

The clock on the mantle chimed the half hour. He must tell Larkin to hold his bath until after dinner. He could not fathom undressing completely

only to have to redress for dinner with the duchess. Life was certainly more complicated as a woman.

Dinner went smoothly, somewhat better than conversation in the carriage, because Dora plied her aunt with questions about the Season past in London. While her aunt had not attended many entertainments, she had heard all the gossip of the spring and summer and was more than willing to part with it. As Dora had said, they really needed to know what was what before being tossed into Polite Society without a clue about the latest scandal or the *on-dit* of the moment. So rapt at the intrigues of the London Season, Finn scarcely noticed the delicious dinner until his dessert plate was whisked away by one of the maids.

This might be his best opportunity tonight to get Dora alone.

“Larkin, would ye see tae the potboys bringing up hot water for my bath? I’d mentioned it tae Mr. Osborne earlier.” Strange to be giving orders to a lady’s maid, but in his current condition he had no choice. “While ye are seeing tae that, I believe I will take a short stretch o’ my legs around the woods while it is still light.” Thankfully, they had eaten early, and the sky was little more than a pale gray. A perfect time for a walk without prying eyes.

“Could I accompany Finn, Aunt Mimi? I am weary with so much sitting. I’m sure a brisk walk would do me a world of good.” Dora turned pleading eyes on her aunt.

Finn held his breath while the duchess drained her wineglass then set it in the center of her plate. “I have always believed exercise good for the young.” She stared at Dora, as if weighting something in her mind, then nodded. “I see no harm in it. However, you must return to our chamber at a decent hour, Dora. I do not wish to have trouble waking you in the morning.”

The duchess turned her gaze on Finn for a long moment. "I believe Dora will be in excellent hands with you, Lord Aberfoyle. You have borne all your trials with fortitude, and when the time comes, I will vouch for you with Lord Downing." She rose and signaled to Marcella. "Help me to bed, Marcella. We have another long day of traveling tomorrow, and I am not as young as I once was."

"You are just as young in spirit as you ever were, Your Grace." Her maid took her arm and steered the duchess toward her chamber.

"Good night, Dora, Lord Aberfoyle. Remember, I need to awaken Dora early in the morning." She turned back toward them. "Have a care to be quiet when you come in, Dora."

Dora could scarcely believe her aunt's words. Had Aunt Mimi just told her she could stay with Finn tonight? Her mouth dropped open, and she turned to Finn, whose face showed the same shock.

"I certainly took her meaning that way." Finn came to her and took her hands. "Did ye?"

She nodded, excitement bubbling up within her. "It seems Aunt Mimi is granting us her blessing." Dora glanced at the closed chamber door. "If we are to take a stroll, I suggest we do so now. It will look more natural if we then return and go to your room instead of this one."

"Larkin is preparing a bath for me. Will she..."

"Larkin is loyal to me. Besides, she will know everything tomorrow anyway."

Finn frowned. "She will? How?"

Dora laughed and pulled him toward the door. "Lady's maids just

know things. But they are extremely discreet. You needn't worry about Larkin. Shall we truly stroll around the woods? I need to do something, walk, run, twirl around like I did when I was a little girl." She suited the action to her words. "I can't seem to stand still."

"Then come wi' me, love. The fresh air and the beauty o' the woods at twilight are beckoning us." He offered her his arm, but she shook her head.

"You're a woman now, Finn. We must walk side by side, not arm in arm."

"Another reason tae get rid o' this disguise." He dropped a kiss on her cheek. "I wish tae have ye properly on my arm."

Dora opened the door and led Finn down the stairs and out the door toward the back of the Red Lion. The massive stables were off to the left, so they turned to the right, walking back along the side of the building until they stood on the ground below Finn's room. The light had begun to fail, the shadows fading to black on the lawn at their feet.

"The twilight is on our side, at least." Finn took her hand and led her into the woods just behind the inn. The trees, while thin near the building, quickly became quite thick. Just as they lost sight of the inn, Finn pulled her behind one of the stout oak trees. "No' perhaps the most romantic o' places, but I think it will serve."

Startled, Dora froze. What did Finn mean to do out here? Dora peered around the woods, but with the gathering darkness, she couldn't see very far. Still, this was hardly the place for a tryst, especially when they had a comfortable room in the inn at their disposal.

Finn adjusted his skirt then, taking her hand, sank down on one knee. "My dearest love, we've scarcely known one another a fortnight, yet I'm sure

as I am that my name is Phineas Macdonald that there'll ne'er be another woman for me. Only ye."

He squeezed her hands and gazed into her eyes, the love shining there making her heart want to burst with joy. That look of absolute love that she'd longed to see was staring at her from Finn's brilliant blue eyes. She wanted to weep with happiness.

"I have nae right tae ask ye, as I dinna have permission from yer father, and I am no' even my own man until this charge is resolved, yet I canna rest until I know for sure." The pressure on her hands increased. "We spoke once before o' a proposal, but said I would ask ye again, and I realized I havna done sae formally. And this I must dae. Dora, will ye dae me the greatest honor, and agree tae be my wife?"

Tears of joy trickled down her face, but she shook them off and squeezed his hands back. "Yes." Throat so thick she could barely whisper. "Of course, my love."

They were actually, formally betrothed. Never again would she need to wonder if he would return to her or not. Or if his affection for her might disappear. He had answered her as surely as she had answered him.

Dora grasped his shoulders and raised him from the ground then threw her arms around him. Rising up on tiptoe, she pressed her lips to his, kissing him with an abandon that made her body flush with heat. This was the moment she'd been waiting for all her life, to kiss a man she loved and who loved her. Whatever other intimacies they might share, this was the pinnacle of joy she'd sought. And now found. "Truly, I will never change my mind. I wish to marry only you."

As though her words broke something in him, a damn of pent-up

desire perhaps, Finn picked her up and spun her around, laughing.

She joined in, throwing her head back like a child and letting the moment take her. She was his. He was hers. Nothing else in the world mattered.

He brought them to a gentle halt, clasped her head in both his hands, and lowered his mouth to hers. His lips were fierce, pressing kisses on her mouth, her cheeks, her nose, her eyes, down her neck. There he hit a spot that made little frissons of pleasure shoot all over her body.

She gasped as an unknown heat began to build within her, making her shift her weight from one foot to the other, seeking relief from a growing need she didn't understand. "Finn," she whispered, "I don't know—Oh!" He'd sucked her earlobe into his mouth, and now massaged it with his tongue, making her move as in a sensual, silent dance. With each stroke of his tongue, her knees got weaker, her breathing became labored, and her core began to ache deep inside her.

"Dora?" With a groan, he moved back from her, and the pounding of blood in her ears eased a bit. Peering into her eyes, he seemed to be searching her soul. "Much as I desire ye, I think we should stop noo. More than this and I fear I'll nae have the willpower tae restrain myself. We promised yer aunt we'd dae nothing during our journey and we must abide by that promise."

"But we've already broken that rule when we kissed." She leaned toward him, hungry for his lips once more, but he grasped her shoulders and held himself from her.

"Aye, we've broken that part o' the promise, and I dinna wish tae be guilty o' breaking my oath completely." His eyes still hungered for her, but the determination in his face said he'd not be persuaded. At least not this

night. “A wee bit o’ sin can be more easily forgiven than the whole o’ the wickedness.”

“But I don’t want to wait, Finn.” She met his eyes, hoping the only thing he saw in her face was the love she had for him. “Even Aunt Mimi has given us her dispensation, although I’m not exactly sure why. But she must think we should be together, else she’d have me locked in her room this minute.” She brushed the backs of her fingers across his cheek. “Don’t you see? We are meant to be together tonight.”

He leaned his forehead against hers, his urgent panting betraying how thin his control still was.

God knew hers was fraying.

“Just because we can dae something, disna mean we should.”

“What?” Confused, she took a step back. “Do you not want me, Finn?”

“Och, aye, I want ye, *mo chridhe*. More wi’ each minute that passes.” He cupped her cheek, his hand warm against her skin. “But putting our promise aside, there’s another danger we should no’ take lightly.”

“What danger?” Granted, she knew almost nothing about what when on between husband and wife, but no one, not Judith or Violet or her sisters, had ever said anything about the marriage bed being dangerous.

“Though ye are promised tae me, we are no’ yet wed. Neither is my life certain until I reach London and my uncle secures a pardon for my foolish act. Until then, I am no’ a free man.”

“All the more reason, my love, for us to be together tonight as man and wife. What if...” She paused, unwilling to say the words that would kill her should they come to pass. “What if something happens to you? Then I will

at least have the memory of this night together with you.”

“What if when ye leave my bed, ye’re carrying my child?” The dire tone of his voice snuffed the incipient joy his words evoked.

“Then...I will have your son or daughter to comfort me, Finn. To carry on your name.” Why must he bring up such a horrible thought?

“Nae, Dora. What ye will have is a wee bastard tae raise, likely on yer own.”

She jerked her head away to gaze into his stern face. “What are you talking about?”

“We ar’na wed, Dora. Ye have only the promise of my name, no’ the protection o’ it. If I die before we marry, ye’ll be a ruint woman, yer family will disown ye, and ye’ll be left alone wi’ nothing, tae raise my bairn as best ye can.” He turned a sorrowful gaze on her. “I dinna want that for ye or our child. Dae ye?”

Blinking back tears, Dora shook her head. Much as she wanted to argue with him, there was no argument. “No, of course not.”

“Then let us return tae the inn, *mo gradh*. And I’ll make ye another promise.” He gently kissed her forehead. “We’ll have a grand wedding night—but after the wedding.”

Disappointed, Dora followed Finn as they threaded their way back through the trees.

Darkness had descended while they conversed beneath the leafy woods, but the lights shining through the kitchen window acted as a beacon, showing them the way back to the inn—and to their separate rooms.

Chapter 21

The journey to Grantham, where they expected to spend the second night, was indeed long, made even more so by the keen looks Aunt Mimi sent them regularly, whenever the conversation in the carriage lagged. Of course, she and Finn were innocent of any wrongdoing, but her aunt obviously did not think so. Unfortunately, they could hardly protest their innocence until she accused them of something. It was altogether a very confusing and tense day of travel. And as Aunt Mimi merely continued to glare at them, Dora was exceedingly thankful when, sometime after noon, they swept into the yard of a coaching inn—the Olde White Hart in Newark-on-Trent—and disembarked. Never had she been so sick of commenting on the weather in her life. Now, at least, they could praise or complain about the food when they returned to their journey.

The meal went smoothly, the food actually well-cooked and presented in their private parlor. Dora and her aunt freshened up then left the room to allow Finn to do the same. They walked out to the coachyard, where Aunt Mimi's coachman had the carriage ready for them.

"Shouldn't we wait here for Mrs. Devereaux, aunt?" Dora peered back into the inn, looking for Finn.

"Yes, Dora, I should say we must." Aunt Mimi grasped her arm tightly, bringing Dora's attention to her aunt's face, now with an uncharacteristic smile pasted on it.

"What is wro— Ouch."

Squeezing her arm tighter stopped Dora's words as Aunt Mimi nodded slightly toward the courtyard.

A bolt of fear shot through Dora, but she managed to turn her head naturally toward the carriage.

A troop of seven soldiers, their red coats bright in the afternoon sun, stood milling around the coachyard.

Dear God. Dora would have staggered had Aunt Mimi not pinched the arm she held in a vise-grip. The extra nip of pain cleared Dora's head and set her to thinking how best to warn Finn of the soldiers' presence without attracting any undue attention to him. She looked Aunt Mimi in the eyes. "Let me go see what is keeping dear Mrs. Devereaux, aunt. You stay here while I fetch her."

Aunt Mimi nodded, apparently pleased with Dora's response. If only she didn't start to shake like a tree in high wind. She turned back toward the inn and hurried into the taproom, just as Finn was about to emerge.

"I truly dinna know how ye ladies manage these skirts—" Finn stopped, a frown quickly replacing his sunny smile. "Dora, ye look as though ye've seen a ghost. What has happened?"

"There you are, Mrs. Devereaux." She raised the pitch of her voice to a squeaky whine. "We wondered where you had gotten to." Laughing, Dora took Finn's arm and leaned into him. "Soldiers in the yard," she whispered then continued to laugh.

A split second of panic in Finn's face gave way to smiles and his laughter joined hers. "I couldna seem tae find my shawl, my dear. It had slipped under the table, and I had the worst time locating it." He dropped his voice low. "How many? Is it Scarlet?"

"Well, I'm glad you finally found it. It is too pretty to lose." The patrons would think them totally mad, but she cared not a jot. "Seven. I didn't

see him, but he didn't have that many with him. I pray it is a different troop."

"Quite likely. And sae," Finn straightened his wig with the little lacy cap pinned to it, "yer aunt's subterfuge may be my saving grace at that. Come along. We have tae act as naturally as possible."

They joined Aunt Mimi, still standing just outside the inn door, surveying the chaos as though she were a general taking stock of a battleground. "Come along, Dora, Mrs. Devereaux. *Tempus fugit*." She started toward the carriage, picking her way over the dusty ground. "We have miles to journey yet today."

Dora and Finn fell in behind her, still giggling, leaning on one another, which helped mask Finn's height. They entered the carriage and settled quickly. Aunt Mimi rapped on the trap. "Drive on, Upton."

Finn sat well back in his seat, his head bowed so all that could be seen was his gray wig and cap. He fussed with the shawl, which also helped hide him from anyone interested in the occupants of the carriage.

Aware that she was known to Lieutenant Scarlet and his men, Dora turned to her aunt. "Aunt Mimi, can you look at the soldiers as we drive past them? Tell me if there is one who seems to be in command who is tall and blond? He's a lieutenant, if you know what that uniform looks like."

"His coat is a brighter shade o' red, almost scarlet," Finn whispered, "with a gorget, a metal plate around his neck."

The carriage turned in the wide yard, flashing by the group of soldiers.

"I see one gentleman with a metal medallion of some sort around his neck," Aunt Mimi reported, "but he has dark hair." She peered out the window as the carriage left the yard. "I saw no one else who might have been

the man you're looking for. All the others' uniforms were much plainer than the brunette's."

"It must be another patrol, Finn." Dora heaved a sigh of relief and sank back on the seat. Her shoulders were quite sore from the tension of the past few minutes.

"Which could mean they've sent out additional troops to look for me." A glum look she'd never seen on Finn's face sent a pang of fear through Dora.

"If so, they did not recognize you just now." She stuck her head out the window and crooked it to look back down the road toward the inn. "They are not giving pursuit."

"Thank goodness." Aunt Mimi settled her walking stick between her shoes. "I would not like to have to invoke the power of the Duchess of Ostroda." She raised her chin. "They would find I am a person to be reckoned with in military circles, both in Britain as well as Prussia."

Finn exchanged a smile with Dora, and they relaxed a bit, although Dora couldn't help but be on edge. She didn't suppose she'd be absolutely relieved until they arrived in London and Finn contacted his uncle. Still, it was encouraging that the soldiers didn't seem to notice that Mrs. Devereaux was not a woman. With a little more luck, perhaps they would make it through this journey unscathed.

The conversation during the afternoon was less perfunctory, more animated in all three of them. Aunt Mimi even regaled them with stories of her life in Prussia, and Dora was shocked to find out how wild her aunt had been in her youth. Finn volunteered more information about his life and family, which seemed to go far toward thawing her aunt where he was

concerned. All in all, despite their fright in the innyard, the afternoon had been encouraging.

Shadows were beginning to lengthen when the carriage arrived at their designated stop for the night, The Angel Inn in Grantham. Aunt Mimi had insisted on stopping here as she'd apparently always given her custom to this particular inn whenever she traveled in this part of the world. The imposing inn—built sometime during the Middle Ages—had served members of the Royal household for centuries. In which case, Aunt Mimi had said when they were planning the myriad legs of their journey, it was good enough for her.

Dora had not been particular about their itinerary, although seeing its ancient gray stone made her hope the rooms would be warm enough. Not a sentiment she'd often had to voice in early September.

They were shown to their chambers, and even though the stone walls made her room somewhat chilly, the fire had been lit early and already begun to warm the room. A chest at the end of the huge bed held additional thick blankets, so Dora was satisfied that she would not be cold during the night.

Of course, if she could find a way, she intended to spend some time with Finn in his room after everyone else retired. If they had sufficient restraint, perhaps they could lie together for a while, kissing and caressing one another. They'd be playing with fire, true, but after Finn's unusual self-control last night, she couldn't help but think he could do the same this evening. And every evening until they reached London.

During dinner, she sent him little glances she hoped he understood. She also took the opportunity to nudge his foot under the table, just to reinforce her message. At least he seemed to catch her glances and returned

them whenever her aunt wasn't being attentive, so she believed he'd understood what she planned to do.

After dinner, at Dora's request for an early evening, she and Aunt Mimi bade Finn goodnight, and Larkin and Marcella assisted them into their nightgowns and then into bed. Dora blew out her light and lay still, breathing as evenly and slowly as possible, all the while listening to her aunt, waiting for her to fall asleep. The day must have tired Aunt Mimi, for within ten minutes, the older woman had turned on her back and was snoring lightly. Dora counted to one hundred then slipped from under the covers and padded to the door.

Larkin had left her robe fortuitously placed on a chair nearby, and she took it up then eased the door to the parlor open and sped through it. Once it was shut, Dora breathed easier. She shrugged into her robe and belted it. She'd never been one for breaking rules, but that was before she had something worth breaking them for.

Taking a deep breath, Dora cracked the door and stuck her head out into the corridor. The coast was clear, so she crept into the dark hallway and sped the short steps to Finn's room on the left. She scratched lightly on the panel then pressed her ear to it but heard nothing. Was he asleep already? Well, she could think of several ways to awaken him so he wouldn't mind a bit. Smiling at those images, Dora pushed down the latch and slipped inside.

The room was pitch black. Not even the fire had been banked, leaving it chilly.

"Finn?" This was exceedingly odd.

She took a step into the darkness and suddenly sensed someone behind her. She whirled around, opening her lips to shout when a rough hand

clamped over her mouth, shutting off her cry.

Chapter 22

After bidding Dora and the duchess goodnight, Finn made his way down the corridor, pausing to twitch his skirts out of the way. Every step or two, he managed to step on the hem of the gown and pitch forward. Marcella, in an effort to give him enough length, had given him too much. Perhaps the maid could take the skirt up tomorrow. But then what would he wear in the carriage? There had only been one gown in Lady Downing's chest to alter for him. None of Dora's came close to fitting him, and he wouldn't have dared suggest the duchess donate one of her own to the cause—even though the disguise had been her idea. Well, this costume had proved its worth today at the innyard.

Depressing the latch, Finn pushed the door open and stood on the threshold, the premonition that something was wrong washing over him like a cold tide. Before he could retreat, a hand grabbed his bodice and yanked him into the dark room. Off balance, the damned skirts swirling about his legs, Finn stumbled into someone, windmilling his arms in a vain attempt to right himself. The man grabbed him around the waist. Finn took the opportunity to jab him in the kidney. They both went down, and the room erupted with cursing as other men converged on them. Damn, how many were there? Finn renewed his efforts, pounding any part of the man beneath him he could lay a blow on.

“Light a damned candle!”

Scarlet's voice, by Christ. Finn redoubled his efforts as new hands grabbed at him. The light flared, revealing Scarlet, Gates, and another soldier whose name Finn didn't recall. Finn rolled up onto his feet, or tried to, but the

damned skirts were caught under his body, and he plummeted back down onto the hapless private who'd originally grappled with him.

Lieutenant Scarlet's fist crashed into the side of Finn's face, knocking him on his back, his wig flying off into a dark corner. "Thought to get by us with a clever disguise, did you, Aberfoyle?" He drew back and let fly again, hitting Finn in the left eye, which immediately began to swell.

"What's the matter, Scarlet? Only able tae hit a man when he's down?" Taunting his attacker might not be the wisest idea, but Finn needed to distract the man long enough to somehow get to his feet. Once standing, he might have a chance, although the odds were certainly against him.

With a growled blasphemy, Scarlet reached down and hauled Finn to his feet then aimed a blow at his head, whipping his arm around from the side.

Finn blocked that move then drove his fist into Scarlet's stomach with such force the lieutenant doubled over and the shoulder seam of Finn's bodice ripped open. But before Finn could follow his punch with another blow, Gates and the other soldier grabbed his arms and pinned them behind him. He struggled, and almost tore free, but Gates landed a blow of his own, catching Finn on his chin. The light wavered out.

When he came to, he was trussed like a Christmas goose, his hands and feet tied with rope, lying on the bed, with Gates holding a pistol trained on his head. The situation could have been worse, but only if they'd simply killed him outright. At this point, they likely would.

A sickening realization disrupted Finn's attempts to get his bearings. Scarlet had nothing to lose, really, if he wanted to kill Finn. And much to gain. The charges of misconduct would fall away upon Finn's death, and his murder would be put down as an unfortunate happenstance. The culprit's

death occurred while he was attempting another escape from justice. Under those circumstances, Scarlet would likely get away scot-free.

The loathsome officer approached the bed, a grin on his face. “Come to just in time for the fun to begin, have you, Aberfoyle?”

This was not going to go well for Finn. The man was out for blood, and if Finn couldn’t manage to get loose, or somehow deter Scarlet from the next in his series of punishments, Finn might very well die tonight. The thought spurred him to action. He pulled at the ropes that bound his hands, rolled toward the edge of the bed, and yelled at the top of his voice, “Help! Help! They’re killing me!”

Scarlet punched him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of Finn and effectively cutting off any breath to call for help. Gates pushed him back onto the bed, while the third soldier shoved a gag into his mouth and tied it tight. The fourth soldier, the one he’d landed on originally, sat dazed in the corner of the room.

“You’re going to need more help than a few servants when we’re through with you.” Scarlet nodded to Gates. “Check the corridor, make sure no one’s coming to the rescue.”

The soldier opened the door a crack then shook his head. “All’s clear.”

“Good. As soon as the inn settles down for the night, we’ll spirit you away, Aberfoyle. Your little lightskirt won’t miss you until breakfast.” Scarlet cocked his head. “Unless you had a tryst arranged with her tonight?”

Finn’s heart sank. If he’d read Dora’s signals right, she was indeed going to attempt a rendezvous with him in his chamber. He didn’t even want to contemplate the consequences. He grunted through his gag and shook his

head violently.

“Hmm.” The lieutenant chuckled. “The lady doth protest too much.” He walked over to the candle and snuffed it out. “We shall wait a while and see who turns up. If it’s only the barmaid come to wait on you, we’ll ignore her, and she’ll be on her way in no time. If it’s your lady...well, perhaps we’ll have to let her in to join the party.” His face turned ugly. “You two have made us laughing stocks not only in Yorkshire, but within the regiment itself. But no one will be laughing after tonight.” He glared menacingly at Finn. “Certainly neither of you.”

Fury obliterated any fear he might have felt at the threat to him, and Finn strained against his bindings and screamed with all his might. He might have saved his strength as far as screaming was concerned. The gag muffled all sound. No one could have heard him from more than a foot away. The ropes, however, were another story. Whenever he struggled with them, they stretched just a little. If he kept tugging on them stealthily, he might be able to free his hands. And then Scarlet would find himself on the business end of these ropes.

Time stretched out, and Finn began to think he’d mistaken Dora’s signals under the table. He prayed to God that was true. The ropes had loosened considerably around his hands, but there was no way to work on the ones that bound his legs. Or was there? The men who’d bound him had done so by tying the rope around his legs and skirts. He slowly moved his feet, testing the play in those ropes as well. He was wearing shoes, not boots. One after the other, he slipped out of the mules. Under cover of the darkness, he might slip his feet upward, into the skirts of the gown. With nothing solid to hold the ropes taut, they should loosen. He could pull the rope away as soon

as his hands were free, and at least have a fighting chance against these mongrels. They'd had the advantage of surprise when they overpowered him. Now that would be on his side. He was, however, outnumbered four to one, although the first man he'd fought seemed much less of a threat. He'd not moved from his corner where he lay groaning. Three to one odds were better, but not much. He'd need to figure out a plan. Praying Dora was fast asleep next to the duchess, Finn concentrated on freeing his hands.

A scratching at the door brought Finn's heart into his throat. Dear God, let it be the maid.

The door opened, and he could just make out Dora's silhouette in the doorway.

Finn screamed at her, but it came out as so much air and hum.

The figure slipped inside. "Finn?"

A muffled squawk followed by sounds of a struggle brought Finn to the brink of madness. He couldn't see a damned thing, and what he imagined was worse.

"Light the candle." Scarlet's voice sounded satisfied.

It flamed, revealing Hopkins with one hand over Dora's mouth, the other across her breasts.

She'd come in nothing but her robe and shift, not even her corset to protect her from the man's filthy touch.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Scarlet paced over to Dora, whose wide eyes showed her overwhelming fear. "You played quite the lady when we called at your home, Miss Harper. Pity you're no more than a common, lying strumpet."

Anger flashed in Dora's eyes. She bit down on the hand covering her

mouth. The soldier let out a yelp and cradled his hand. Simultaneously, she elbowed him in the side, and he careened backward. Dora opened her mouth to scream.

But Scarlet calmly drew his pistol and pointed it at Finn's head. "Scream and he dies."

Her lips clamped shut, and she turned her wide-eyed gaze to Finn. "Are...are you all right?"

Finn nodded, both terrified for her and inordinately proud of her courage. He had to find a way to get her out of this room before the situation got even more out of control. With his tongue, he pushed at the gag and managed to shift the wadding to the side. Overjoyed, Finn sucked in a breath and shouted, "Run!"

Without question, Dora whirled toward the door, actually put her hand on the latch and pulled. Unfortunately, Gates slammed it shut and pushed her into the center of the room.

Dora turned to the lieutenant, eyes blazing. "I demand that you release me, Lieutenant Scarlet. You have no authority whatsoever to detain me."

"I can hold anyone I suspect of aiding and abetting a criminal. Especially one wanted for treason."

"That is a spurious charge, and you know it." Dora started toward Scarlet, but the man pressed the muzzle of the pistol against Finn's head, and she stopped in her tracks.

Finn held his breath, feverishly working at the ropes that still restrained his hands.

"How did you manage to find us?" Dora looked more perturbed than

frightened. “Was it the soldiers in the yard at the Olde White Hart? Did they tell you they had seen us?”

Scarlet shook his head. “They must have been on patrol from elsewhere. I’ve no idea who they may have been. No, it was your Mr. Cardrew who tipped us to your deception. When I asked after your father’s health, the good doctor informed me that he’d never treated your father. But he had tended a cousin with a bad ankle.” His smile exuded evil. “A cousin with dark auburn hair.”

Finn sighed. They’d been wrong not to tell the doctor the truth. Then he might have kept their secret.

“It was the work of a few minutes to ride to Bromley and discover you gone. You will be happy to know that your servants are most loyal to you, Miss Harper. It took quite a bit of persuading before they would tell us anything.”

“If you’ve harmed one of my servants, I swear to you, Lieutenant Scarlet, you will be made to pay for it.” Dora’s chest heaved as she scowled at the officer.

The lieutenant shrugged. “Since Aberfoyle had originally been heading south, we gambled that he would continue that way. So we headed down the Great North Road, checking every coaching inn to see if your aunt’s carriage had been spotted. When we got to Doncaster this morning, we found we were right on your tail. And lo and behold, a groom there mentioned you were planning to stop in Grantham tonight.”

To have their grand scheme brought low by the slip of a groom’s tongue was maddening, but something was bound to have tripped them up anyway. Finn listened to Scarlet with one ear while trying to concentrate on

freeing his hands.

“You certainly had your share of good fortune with your hunt, lieutenant.” Dora’s tone was anything but congratulatory. “But Grantham has more than one inn. How did you know to come here?”

“That was a bit of luck, I must admit. We’d split up to cover each of the inns, and when Gates rode into the innyard here at The Angel, there stood your aunt’s rather elaborate carriage, Miss Harper. Your coachman had described it in some detail after we applied the correct persuasions. From that point, we simply bided our time. Discovering Aberfoyle’s disguise gave us quite a laugh, and in the end, it proved useful in assisting in our capture of him. Skirts can be so cumbersome when one is trying to run.” Scarlet scowled down at Finn. “You won’t be running any more, I assure you, Aberfoyle.”

Dora kept glancing from Scarlet’s face to the gun aimed at Finn’s head. Fear glazed her eyes. “If you release us now, I will see to it that you are not cashiered for your treatment of us.” Then her face changed as a look of absolute determination came over it. “But if you continue your persecution of Lord Aberfoyle, if you kill him, I swear on everything I hold holy, I will personally see to it that you are hanged by the neck until you are dead.” She peered directly at Scarlet, her face filled with righteous indignation. “And I promise you, the last thing you will see in this world will be my smiling face as they put the noose around your neck.”

Scarlet laughed, although the man’s face had paled considerably. “You’re a woman. You have no power to do anything at all to me.”

“I myself, perhaps not. But I have powerful friends and relatives, lieutenant.” She nodded to Finn. “As does his lordship. His uncle is the Marquess of Abernethy, one of the parliamentary representatives for Scotland.

I am the daughter of a viscount, Lord Downing, and the niece of the Duchess of Ostroda.” Dora took a step toward Scarlet, who actually backed away, although he kept the pistol trained on Finn. “And I am the close personal friend of Viscount Trevor, who I believe you met. I hope you remember his face. A no-nonsense gentleman, if ever there was one.”

“What of it, Miss Harper?” Scarlet’s face had acquired a fine sheen of sweat.

“Should word of any of this get to him,” she waved her hands about the room, “well, I saw what he did to my brother, who had assaulted the woman Lord Trevor loved. He will not wait for courts martial or a hangman’s noose. If you’re lucky, he’ll simply shoot you and be done with it.”

“Shut up.” Scarlet pressed the pistol against Finn’s head so hard the barrel dug into his scalp.

Dora shrugged. “But if you’re out of luck, he will cut you to pieces with his sword and enjoy your every scream.”

“Hopkins! Shut this whore up!” Scarlet jerked Finn up in the bed.

“Sir?” Hopkins stepped forward but looked confused. “You want me to gag her, lieutenant?”

“I want you to stop her mouth any way you can.” He looked down at Finn and leered. “I’m sure you can think of something you can stick in there. Gates, grab her.”

Dora dodged around him and made a run for the door, but the soldier caught her easily and pulled her back into the room, forcing her down on her knees.

Finn’s heart stopped. After everything Dora had just threatened, Scarlet must be mad to order his men to do such a depraved thing. Neither

Hopkins nor Scarlet would leave this room alive, so help him God.

With a lecherous look, Hopkins said, “Yes, sir,” and his hand went to his fall.

It was now or never. Finn made a final pull of the ropes and his hands came free. His legs were still bound, but he’d have to deal with that somehow. Right now, he had to stop Hopkins, standing before Dora, who looked utterly confused.

The man dropped his fall, his member tumbling out fully erect and ready.

Dora took one look and screamed. She tried to rise, but Gates held her down.

“Open wide, little missy,” Hopkins crooned.

Chapter 23

In desperation born of fear, Finn grabbed not for the pistol but for the hand that held it.

Leaning forward, intent on the debauchery taking place at the foot of the bed, Scarlet was already off balance. Finn yanked the lieutenant onto the bed, grabbed the pistol, aimed and fired at Hopkins.

The man yelped and thumped to the floor. Good. One down.

Tussling with the lieutenant, Finn scrabbled at Scarlet's side and drew his dagger. Whipping it around, he rested it against the man's exposed neck. With his other hand, he stripped the gag from his mouth. "Call off yer dogs, cur, or ye'll no' live tae see the dawn."

The door burst open, and the duchess strode in, garbed in a strange robe of many colors, followed by her maid, Larkin, the innkeeper, and a number of curious potboys.

The duchess peered at him, lips pursed. "Apparently your ruse has been discovered, Lord Aberfoyle."

Finn grinned at the older lady, as welcome a sight as an avenging angel. "Good evening, Duchess. Apparently sae. Dora?" He tried to peer over the end of the bed but couldn't see her.

"I'm fine, Finn." Carefully, she rose, stumbled into the arms of her aunt and burst into tears.

"There, there, my dear. Get yourself in hand. You seem to have lived through the worst of it." The duchess peered down at the unconscious Hopkins. "Can someone cover this unfortunate man's privates? I doubt he'd want them on display from the looks of them."

The innkeeper hurried forward and laid a napkin over the man's open fall.

"Now, Aberfoyle." The duchess rapped her stick on the floor sharply. "Explain this bizarre tableau, please."

The lieutenant squirmed, and Finn pressed the knife more firmly to Scarlet's neck. The man yelped and tried to struggle, drawing a single drop of blood. "A moment please, Duchess." He bent down to Scarlet's ear. "Be on yer best behavior, lieutenant," he whispered. "Ye wouldn't want my hand tae slip because ye tried tae move. I'd have sae many witnesses that ye cut yer throat yerself."

"Unhand me, damnit, Aberfoyle."

"Sae ye can attack my fiancée and try tae kill me again? When pigs fly wi' their tails forward, lieutenant." Finn grinned at him. "I'll be happy tae share this bed with ye for a while. At least until a superior officer can be summoned tae hear the truth o' the matter." He tightened his hold on the officer. "Since I recall yer commanding officer is up in Edinburgh, we will have tae settle for someone closer. Innkeeper."

"Yes, my lady...uh, my lord?" The tall, thin man Finn had met when they arrived stepped forward, eyes wide as if in a trance. Mr. Perry likely didn't discover soldiers being held at knife point in his rooms every day.

"Is there a military barracks nearby? I'm in need o' a major or lieutenant-colonel, although I suppose a lowly captain would dae as a superior officer tae the lieutenant here. Lieutenant Scarlet has been a wee bit o' a bad'un, it seems."

"Gates, do something." Scarlet twisted in Finn's hands so vigorously it was hard not to cut him.

The only soldier left standing, Gates looked from Scarlet, to the fallen Hopkins, to the injured man in the corner and shook his head. “I don’t rightly know what to do, lieutenant.”

“Take your pistol and shoot this mad dog.” Scarlet continued to struggle in Finn’s arms. “Don’t aim to kill, just wound him in the arm so I can get free of him.”

Scarlet was surely deranged, suggesting a shot so close to his own head. At some point in his pursuit of Finn, he’d apparently become completely unhinged.

“Shoot, damn it.”

Hesitantly, Gates raised his pistol.

“Young man, I suggest you lower that pistol if you know what is good for you.” The duchess stepped forward and poked Gates in the stomach with her walking stick, knocking him backward. “You will neither shoot my nephew-to-be, nor anyone else on the authority of a man who is clearly mad.”

Gates stared first at Scarlet then at the imposing woman. “Are you really a duchess, ma’am?”

“I am indeed. The Duchess of Ostroda.” She pierced him with a steely gaze Finn wouldn’t have wanted to meet on a dark night. “I have more political connections than you can count, young man. You’d best do as I say or face the consequences.” She then turned to Lieutenant Scarlet. “You too, villain.”

The duchess stalked forward, each step punctuated by the click of her stick, until she stood at the end of the bed, directly in front of Scarlet. “I do not know why you are persecuting Lord Aberfoyle, but you will cease your harassment of him immediately or you will be made to pay.” She leaned

forward and shook her stick in the lieutenant's face. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I won't do it."

Finn couldn't have loved the duchess any more than he did at that moment. The look of astonishment on Gates's face was priceless. He only wished he could see Scarlet's.

Seeming to disregard the duchess's dire warning, Scarlet squirmed again and called out, "Innkeeper!"

Dutifully, Mr. Perry stepped forward again. "Yes, sir?"

"I am Lieutenant Geoffrey Scarlet of Lord Lucas's 34th Regiment of Foot, stationed at Edinburgh Castle. Lord Aberfoyle here broke the law of the land, and I am bound by my oath to the Crown to take him to my garrison in Edinburgh to be charged." Scarlet's subdued tones might well inspire confidence in his statement from a man such as Perry. "Let me and my men take Aberfoyle in. I swear, we are bound for Edinburgh to question him."

"If that's all ye were trying tae dae, Scarlet, why is yer man unconscious on the floor with his privates exposed?" Every time Finn thought about what they had tried to do to Dora, he wanted to sink the knife into Scarlet's bared throat and revel in the man's demise. He pressed the knife a bit harder. If the man swallowed, he'd cut his own throat.

"Yes, lieutenant," the duchess had pushed past Mr. Perry to stand before Scarlet once more. "Explain just what that unfortunate young man was attempting to do to my niece?"

"It was a bluff only, madam." Scarlet must have felt the blade bite for he pressed his head back on Finn's chest. "We were trying to frighten Aberfoyle into going with us without a fight. Wanted to avoid something like this."

“That might have the ring o’ truth, Scarlet, except at the time Miss Harper entered the room I was already tied up and gagged. There was nae question I was going with ye. And quietly.” The knife trembled with the tension in Finn’s hand. He wanted to kill the bastard so badly he couldn’t think of anything else.

“Lord Aberfoyle?” Mr. Perry had come forward and was peering at him. “Are the lieutenant’s charges true? Did you break a law?”

“Aye, I did.” Finn nodded to the innkeeper. “But the offense was slight compared tae what the lieutenant wishes tae charge me with.”

“It was an act of treason, Aberfoyle, pure and simple.” Scarlet wiggled so frantically Finn had to loosen his hold on the man. Quick as a snake strike, the lieutenant flung himself off the bed and his sword rang free of the scabbard. “We will take the prisoner to Edinburgh at first light.”

“I’d no’ go across the street tae a pub with ye, Scarlet.” Finn rolled to the opposite side of the bed, keeping his distance from Scarlet, and began to untie the rope around his legs. “Much less make a week’s long journey. Find the nearest garrison and put the matter before its commander.”

“Aye, my lord, there’s one over in Nottingham, not a half a day’s ride.” Mr. Perry pointed toward the far wall. “The 15th Dragoons is stationed there. Major Collins is in command.”

“I know nothing of this Major Collins.” The lieutenant looked rather wild with the sword, whipping it this way and that. “I’m the officer in command of these men, and I am sworn to take my prisoner to my garrison in Edinburgh.”

“Lieutenant, I will gladly turn myself in tae Major Collins tomorrow and inform him myself o’ my transgression.” Finn ran his hand through his

hair, glad to be rid of the hot wig. He'd be even happier to be out of these heavy skirts, but that would have to come later. He still had to convince Scarlet to let him go for the night. "If he deems there is tae be a trial, I will retain counsel and let the judge decide my innocence or guilt. And if punishment is tae be meted out, it will be at the hands o' someone more temperate than ye."

Scarlet scowled at him then cut his gaze over to Mr. Perry, the duchess, and the plethora of other witnesses. By agreeing to surrender himself to a greater authority than the lieutenant, Finn hoped he'd cut Scarlet's legs out from under him. The innkeeper and all the others had understood all too well what Scarlet had allowed his men to do to Dora. Knew too the officer had overstepped the boundaries of decency in doing so. They'd more likely support Finn at this point.

"I demand you surrender yourself to me tonight, Aberfoyle." Scarlet pointed his sword at Finn's chest. "Tomorrow, we'll head to Nottingham, and you can tell your story to the major. But I'm not letting you out of my sight tonight."

"I plan tae sleep in this bed tonight, lieutenant. Ye and yer men are welcome tae sit outside my door all night long." Finn sketched a bow. "However, I draw the line at four odd bedfellows." Finn frowned. "Dinna ye have a fifth man under yer command when last we met?"

"Lackland's out with the horses, my lord." Gates had spoken up, but a scathing look from Scarlet shut him up quickly.

"Och, well, that accounts for that. Gentlemen, ladies," he bowed to Dora and the duchess, "'tis late, and we have an early morning on the road tae Nottingham, sae if ye will excuse me, I need tae change—"

“I know you don’t think me fool enough to allow you to stay in this room tonight, Aberfoyle.” A deep scowl on his face, Lieutenant Scarlet seemed ready to come across the bed and throttle Finn. “You’d slip out the window before I could set a watch outside the door. No, if you stay the night in this room, it won’t be alone.” He sneered at Dora. “And it won’t be with your lady-bird, either.”

Finn started across the bed, intent on killing the swine, when small, strong hands grasped him from behind.

“No, Finn,” Dora whispered, “don’t let him goad you into attacking him. Then he could kill you and say it was justified.”

“I willna allow him tae slander ye with such names,” he whispered back, touching her face. He loved her so very much at this moment he thought he might die with the fullness in his heart.

“They are only names. We know they are not true. For God’s sake, let it go.”

Finn nodded. He couldn’t lose his head and give Scarlet the satisfaction of skewering him.

“My aunt and I will let Lord Aberfoyle stay in our room with us and our maids tonight.” Dora looked at her aunt, who nodded. “Will that suffice, lieutenant?”

“Hah,” Scarlet scoffed. “You’re already in league with him. I’d as soon put a mouse in charge of a wheel of cheese. He’d be out the window and down the road before the door clicked shut. No, he’ll stay within our sight all night, thank you.” He turned to Mr. Perry. “Innkeeper, do you have a room with good stout lock that has no windows? It doesn’t have to be one of your bedchambers, just a safe place Aberfoyle can’t pick his way out of.”

Mr. Perry put his hand on his chin, thinking. "There's only the cellar. I keep the wine down there. I get parties of gentry or nobility who want a good bottle occasionally. I keep it under lock and key."

"That'll do." Scarlet waved his sword. "Lead us to it, if you please, sir."

Finn turned to follow Mr. Perry when Dora grabbed his hand. "Finn, you can't sleep in a wine cellar."

"If I canna be with ye, I have nae qualm being locked in with the wine." He looped her hand through his arm. "Besides, who said ye canna come visit me while I'm there?"

Dora cut her gaze at Scarlet, still pointing his sword at them. "Do you think he'll put up a fuss?"

Finn shrugged, and they hurried after Mr. Perry. "There are too many witnesses tae this little escapade. If he disna act honorably tonight, it will be all over the town in the morning and will spread from there." He patted her hand. "I dinna trust him, but I think we will be fine. Once we get tae Nottingham and confront Major Collins, it may go differently. I'm no' sure how stringently they regard the breaking o' the Dress Act, but at least someone other than Scarlet will be hearing the case."

They wound their way down to the kitchen where Mr. Perry revealed a set of stone steps leading under the inn. He picked up a lantern and lit it from the fireplace. "Follow me."

Finn stared at the gray granite stairs, and a chill raced down his back. "Dora, perhaps instead ye should return tae yer room." He untucked her hand and kissed it. "Ye canna stay wi' me all night and it's likely cold and damp down there. Get yer rest and I will see ye in the morning."

She raised up on tiptoe and kissed him hard and long, her sweet mouth the best solace.

“Come on, Aberfoyle.” Gates shoved him away from Dora.

Much as Finn would have loved to plant the man a facer, he shrugged it off. “Jealous, Gates?”

The soldier narrowed his eyes at Finn and shoved him roughly again. “Get on wi’ ya.”

The stairs were narrow and steep but not terribly long. Four steps brought them to a barred opening, a huge iron padlock on the gate. The innkeeper took a monstrous key on a chain from around his neck, inserted it, and turned. The lock popped open, and Mr. Perry pushed the gate in. He held the lantern up high, revealing a stone floor and several rows of rough-hewn wine racks. “There’s enough space for you to sit or lie down, my lord. Not much other comfort, I’m afraid.”

“If I can have yer best bottle o’ wine and a glass tae keep me company, I’ll not mind at all, Mr. Perry.” Finn peered into what amounted to a cave, the chill making him suddenly glad for the thick skirts he still wore.

“Wait.” Scarlet pushed past him. “I’ll just make certain there’s no other way out.” He ducked into the opening and stopped. The back wall was only a half dozen paces away and no way out. He spun around. “Very good. Lock him in, Mr. Perry.” The lieutenant shot a look of pure malice at Finn. “I’ll post one of my men at the top of the stairs.”

With a look that spoke of his regret, Mr. Perry handed him the lantern then turned the key in the padlock. “I’ll send a maid down with some blankets, my lord,” he whispered. “And help yourself to that bottle on the back bottom shelf. It’s the best in the cellar.” With a nod, he left, and Finn

settled himself down to wait for the morning, pondering what exactly that would bring.

Chapter 24

“Finn.”

The sound of Dora’s voice brought him instantly awake. His darling stood before the bars, a thick blanket, a pillow, and two glasses in her hands. “Are you all right?”

He rubbed his eyes and stretched. “I must have dozed off as soon as everyone left. What are ye doing here? I thought I told ye tae get yer rest.”

“Not when I could bring you a little comfort.” She passed him the blanket, which went through the bars easily. The pillow was a different matter. They had to flatten it as best they could until it finally squeezed through. Dora looked at the glasses then at the bars, and sighed. “I’m sorry, my love.”

“Nae matter, sweetheart.” Finn had spread the blanket and propped the pillow up against the wall. He strode to the wine rack Perry had pointed to and snared the bottle from the bottom. “Tae him that will, ways are no’ wanting.” Finn wrenched the cork from the bottle and tipped it up to drink. Quite a good vintage. Perry hadn’t lied. He righted the bottle and sighed. “Making sure nae cork got intae your glass. Hold it out.”

The neck of the bottle went through the bars easily, so he poured her half a glass then raised the bottle. “Tae us, my love. A rocky start afore our marriage must mean smooth sailing after.”

“Amen to that.” She clinked her glass against the bottle.

“How did ye get past Gates?” He assumed Scarlet wasn’t standing the watch, and the other men weren’t currently fit to do it.

“Mr. Perry gave me all the items then drew him away to give me time

to slip down here. I only have a short while, and Mr. Perry will send down a maid with more linens. That will be my signal to return.”

“Good man, Perry. Whenever we come through Grantham on our way tae London, we will give him all our custom.”

“That’s a sweet thought, Finn.” Her voice was strong, but she hid her eyes. Worried, no doubt, about what tomorrow would bring.

“Here, sit on the step and I’ll sit next tae the bars sae I can see ye.”

“Nonsense.” She settled right down on the cold hard stone, next to him, and took his hand. “I came to be with you, not sit on a cold step.”

“Ye are the most wonderful fiancée in the world, my dear.” Finn cupped her cheek. “Try no’ tae trouble yourself about tomorrow. When we arrive at the garrison, Scarlet will have tae turn me over tae the major. Then I’ll be safe from the lieutenant.”

“But the major will have to try you, Finn. You broke the law.” Her face screwed up as she tried not to cry.

“And ye will go tae London tae fetch my uncle. He will bring a solicitor and this entire mess will be straightened out. And nae matter how much I wish tae kill Scarlet, I have restrained myself sae far. This trouble will seem like a bad dream in a few days, and then the only thing we need worry about is obtaining yer father’s consent for our marriage.”

“You make that sound like a *fait accompli*.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I assure you, it is not.”

He slipped his hand through the bars to caress her delectably soft earlobe. “Uncle Abernethy will accompany me when I go tae ask for yer hand. No one has ever bested my uncle in any deal. He will make sure that we are married as soon as possible.”

“A special license?”

“Of course. But at St. George’s church.” His hand strayed down to cup her cheek. “I want nae one tae say our wedding wisna fashionable.”

“No one would dare.”

She turned to him, and their lips met, the taste of her making him wild that he could not touch her, could not hold her close once more. Cradling her head, he turned it until they melded and became as one. He slid his tongue into her waiting mouth, loving the soft feel of her, the sweetness of the wine that lingered there. An intense longing came over him, an ache that could only be satisfied by the woman he was kissing. God, but it would be an eternity until they could be together. “Och, this is torture, *mo chridhe*. To have you so near and yet no’ be able tae hold ye in my arms.”

Dora nodded. “I’m sorry now we didn’t spend last night in each other’s arms. At least we would have had that memory to comfort us.”

“Nae, love.” He shook his head. What he wouldn’t give to have made her his own. “’Twas the right decision tae wait. If things go awry tomorrow, I’d no’ wish tae leave ye alone tae bear the shame if ye did quicken with my seed.”

She jerked her head up. “They cannot kill you for wearing that wretched kilt. The law is quite clear. At worst you’d be put in prison for six months.”

“And I doubt they allow prisoners tae marry while they’re serving their sentence.” He fixed her with a keen eye. “I’d no’ want us tae have tae marry wi’ ye six months gone wi’ child.”

“Well, that certainly won’t happen now, will it?” She softened her voice and stroked his cheek. “We can scarcely touch one another through

these bars, so I'm sure we cannot indulge ourselves tonight even if we wished to."

"Tae him that will, ways are no' wanting.' Still, I believe ye're right about that, *mo leannan*." He kissed her palm. "But dinna call it a 'wretched' kilt, if you please." Finn chuckled. "'Tis my father's kilt, and I was proud tae wear it. Will be proud tae wear it when we wed, too."

"Phineas Macdonald, you'll do no such thing!" Dora sat up and glared at him. "A second offence and they would transport you to the colonies for seven long years."

"Would ye no' wait for me?" He smiled at her beguilingly. God, he loved to tease her.

"I would not."

"Nae?" He frowned.

"Nae." She pulled his head toward her and touched her lips to his in a swift, fierce kiss. "I'd make them let me go with you."

Chapter 25

After a cold night, during which he was especially grateful to Mr. Perry for the two blankets, Finn rose as soon as light began to filter down into the cellar. The lantern had burned out during the night, so the early light was quite welcome. He just hoped someone would remember to bring his proper clothing down to him.

Pacing and rubbing his arms to stir up some heat, Finn couldn't help but remember his private interlude through the bars with Dora last night before she was whisked away by the arrival of the barmaid, Mattie. If merely the presence of his soon-to-be wife could bring out a heated longing in him, even in absolutely dismal surroundings, he suspected they would have a full, passionate marriage.

The scrape of shoes on the stone above and the clink of silverware made Finn's ears perk up. It sounded as though Mattie would tend to him as well this morning. The strapping maid appeared, bearing a tray containing a plate covered with a napkin, a cup, and a blessed pot of hot tea.

"Bless ye, Mattie. I'm sae cold a cup o' hot tea is a godsend." He wanted to reach through the bars and snatch the pot off the tray.

"I'm sorry, milord, but I don't have a key." The girl set the tray down on the bottom step and poured tea into a smallish mug. "This was the only mug I could find that might fit through the bars. She looked at him, teapot still raised. "Milk or sugar, milord?"

"Both, please, and thank you, Mattie."

She added the ingredients and held the cup out to him, but it was too round to go through the bars. "My pardon, milord." She looked so distressed,

Finn reached through the gate and patted her arm.

“Never ye mind, Mattie. There are more ways tae kill a dog than hanging.” Finn took the hot cup, pressed his face to the bars, then brought the cup to his lips. The sweet, hot tea warmed him instantly. “The best tea I ever had, Mattie.”

“Thank you, milord.” She set the tray down within his reach and lifted the napkin from the food. The plate held sausages, eggs, kidneys, toast, butter and jam, and a thick slice of ham.

Finn’s mouth watered.

“Best eat while it’s warm. ’Twon’t stay that way long down here.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. Dropping to the floor, Finn sat cross-legged on his voluminous skirts. He speared a sausage and bit into it with gusto.

“If that’s all, milord?” Mattie turned to go.

“Could ye have Miss Harper or her maid send down my real clothing? My disguise is nae longer needed, sae I’d just as soon appear as Lord Aberfoyle as Mrs. Devereaux.”

“Of course, milord.” She dipped him a curtsy then started up the steps.

“And a jug of washing water, if ye dinna mind,” he called after her. Not only would it clean him up but would help warm him as well. He shivered and continued with the hot food.

The coming ordeal with Scarlet weighed on Finn’s mind, though he refused to allow it to deter him from his breakfast. The lieutenant had demonstrated yesterday that he was unbalanced, his judgment impaired by his utter detestation of Finn so much Finn doubted the man would be able to relinquish Finn to another authority. When that scene played out in

Nottingham before the major, it might very well be Scarlet behind bars before the day was done.

As Finn finished up the toast and jam, a light step above made him rise. With luck, Mattie had acquired his suit of clothes and a jug of warm water. He gazed up the stairs eagerly, so his jaw dropped open when a smiling Dora, not Mattie, appeared, clothes and jug in hand.

“Dora! Och, my love, the one person I most wanted tae see.” He reached through the bars to her, wanting nothing more than to touch her again.

She set the clothes and water down then ran to him, pressing her face to the bars, seeking his lips even as he searched for hers. Their mouths met in a blissful tangle of tongues as he strained toward her, wrapping his arms around her as best he could.

“My love, my love.” She pelted his face with kisses, such a sweet rain he grew giddy with it. “Oh, Finn, I cannot stay long. Aunt Mimi agreed to allow me to bring your things, but I have to return immediately.” She leaned her forehead against his. “I simply had to see you before they took you away.”

“More than anything I wished tae see ye as well.” He stilled her mouth by kissing her again, so long and hard they both panted when he reluctantly pulled away. “But ye must go quickly. I need tae wash and change afore Mr. Perry comes tae unlock the cellar and ye shouldna be here while I dae that. Has anyone said how I am tae travel t’ Nottingham?”

“In the carriage with us, of course.” Dora looked indignant that he would even suggest anything else.

“Scarlet may no’ wish tae agree with that,” Finn shook his head, “although I suspect I could escape easier riding a horse alone than in yer aunt’s carriage. Five men on horseback could easily stop such a conveyance,

while I might be able to elude them if I were riding. Hopefully, Scarlet thinks o' that."

"I pray so." Dora squeezed his hands, kissed his lips once more, sweet but fleeting, and ran nimbly up the steps.

His body thrumming with desire for her, Finn shook himself and stooped to drag his clothing through the bars. The jug was a bit of a problem, but after he licked the last crumb from the plate, Finn poured the water into the plate, using it in place of a basin, and, tearing off a piece of his petticoat, began to wash, humming a cheerful tune.

Perhaps a quarter hour later, Finn stood in the cellar, once again attired as a man. The experience of dressing as a woman had been eye opening. He had a much healthier respect for women and what they had to go through with their toilettes, though he was quite certain he never wished to experience such a disguise again.

Heavy footsteps above told him he was about to begin the next part of the ordeal. Mr. Perry came into view, Lieutenant Scarlet right behind him.

"Good morning, my lord." Mr. Perry produced his key and set about releasing him. "I hope your night wasn't too unpleasant."

Considering his lovely interlude with Dora, Finn was able to reply, "Nae, sir. I found the accommodations...stimulating in several ways."

Scarlet cocked an eyebrow at that, but when Mr. Perry opened the cellar, Finn was too preoccupied with getting the hell out of there to pay him any further mind. He took the stairs at a quick clip, arriving at the kitchen and breathing a sigh of relief. That small taste of imprisonment had convinced Finn that he would do whatever act of contrition necessary to keep from being locked up again. Pray God, Major Collins was a level-headed man who could

see reason.

Shielding his eyes against the bright sunshine, Finn strode out into the courtyard, breathing deeply to shake off any lasting effects of his confinement. Dora and the duchess stood in front of their carriage, so he headed toward them.

“Where do you think you’re going, Aberfoyle?” The *zing!* of Scarlet’s sword leaving its scabbard stopped Finn, his hand dropping naturally to where his own sword should have been. “I’ve arranged your transportation over here.”

Bracing himself for some nasty trick from the lieutenant, Finn turned to the officer. Scarlet pointed to a small, open cart, with bare planks hitched to a single horse who had passed ancient some years before. The only gait the animal could be expected to attempt was a walk, which would make the journey an entire day, rather than the half day it would take on a fit animal or in the duchess’s carriage. A jouncing journey on hard planks in the blistering sun for eight hours or more would be torture.

Exactly what Scarlet intended. If he had to relinquish Finn at the end of the journey, he’d make the last hours under his authority the most unpleasant ones possible.

“Nae.” Finn reared back, crossed his arms over his chest, and stared the officer down.

“It’s not a request, Aberfoyle.” Scarlet advanced a step, sword dancing before Finn’s chest. “Put him in the cart, Gates.” His lips curled up in a nasty grin. “Or do I need to teach you a lesson, *my lord?*” With a sudden flick of his wrist, Scarlet sliced Finn’s upper left arm, deep enough to draw blood.

Finn danced backward, looking about for some weapon but found none. The yard was ringed with the soldiers, each of them with a gleam in their eyes. Two had drawn and trained their pistols on him. The third had drawn his own sword, making escape impossible for an unarmed man. They didn't really want to take him in. Not at this point. There would be too many witnesses to speak on his behalf.

Scarlet advanced toward him, blade extended. "Get in the cart, Aberfolye, or I'll put you in piece by piece."

If Finn could be killed escaping, or even defying Scarlet's orders, the army would be within its rights to dismiss his murder as justified. With no weapon to hand, the only course Finn had was to knuckle under, much as he hated to, and get into the bloody cart.

"Come for me, Aberfoyle." The lieutenant opened his arms wide. "I'll give you a fighting chance." The man's smirk said otherwise.

No, Finn's capitulation likely wouldn't satisfy Scarlet in the end. He'd already drawn Finn's blood and, like any animal, was excited by the smell of it. The lieutenant would only be appeased when Finn finally lay dead at his feet.

"You are making a mistake, young man." The duchess stepped forward, thumping the ground with her walking stick. "Allow Lord Aberfoyle to ride in my carriage. He can hardly escape if you and your men surround the conveyance."

Scarlet didn't take his gaze off Finn. "You may follow after us if you must, Duchess, but my prisoner goes where I please, how I please. You have interfered with the king's business too much as it is."

"And will do so once more." She handed her stick to Finn.

“Swordstick, my lord. Now let him see what a fighting chance really is.”

Completely captivated, Finn took the walking stick then said, “Duchess, ye are my favorite person in the world at this moment.” He twisted the silver knob and drew a slim, sharp rapier from the hollow cane. Well balanced and rather light, the blade sliced the air in front of him with a deadly hiss. Tossing the cane aside, Finn snapped *en garde* opposite Scarlet.

The lieutenant smiled widely, his smug face attesting to his confidence in his own prowess.

Well, the officer might have some skill. Most did. However, Finn had grown up with a sword in his hand from the age of eight, thanks to his Uncle Abernathy. A heavier and wider one than the elegant weapon he now wielded, but that mattered not at all. After days of helplessness, it was as if he’d been given his soul back.

Scarlet fainted forward then left but didn’t draw Finn out. Instead, he bided his time and attacked his opponent’s exposed flank. The lieutenant countered, whipping his sword around toward Finn’s shoulder, but he parried that easily then dropped his blade down, seeking to cut upward and slice the man’s thigh. An unexpected ploy that had worked before.

The lieutenant, however, didn’t blink, but parried and beat Finn’s blade away. Finn spun to his right, being mindful not to run over Dora or the duchess.

They danced out of harm’s way and hurried behind the odious cart.

Finn re-engaged Scarlet’s blade with a high approach, attempting to bind the sword and bear it and its owner to the ground. But the officer, nimbler on his feet than Finn would have allowed, skipped back, withdrawing his blade from harm’s way. Well, then, there was nothing for it but to press

forward.

Raining blows left and right in quick succession, Finn pushed the lieutenant backward, crossing the entire courtyard and fetching him up against the wall of the stable. A glancing blow nicked Scarlet's upper arm, though he didn't draw blood due to the thickness of his uniform.

The blow incensed the soldier, however, and with a cry of rage, he mounted an assault on Finn that gained Scarlet back half the dusty yard. As good a place as any to end this.

Breathing heavily, Finn attacked the lieutenant's right flank then whipped his sword up, aiming to split the man's skull. Scarlet caught the blade just in time, and shoved Finn away. But before Scarlet could recover his balance, Finn came in low, put his shoulder into the officer's stomach, and bore him to the ground. Knocking the sword from the man's hand, Finn then abandoned his own weapon in favor of landing several well-deserved blows to Scarlet's face. All the pent-up frustration and anger at the man's treatment of him and his horrible abuse of Dora shot into Finn, and he pounded the man until Gates and Lackland pulled him off the bloodied officer.

Groaning, Scarlet came to his feet, staggering a moment before steadying. "You are going to pay for that, Aberfoyle." He drew his pistol, cocked it, and aimed it at Finn's chest.

As from a distance Finn could hear all the sounds of the innyard: a rider entering the yard, horses snorting, hushed whispers of the spectators drawn to the fight. Dora crying, begging Scarlet to stop.

But he feared this lunatic would never stop, not until he'd crushed Finn under his bootheel for the simple pleasure of seeing him die. If Finn was going to meet his own father now, at least it would be a good death, on his

feet, having fought well and with honor. He raised his chin and stared Scarlet in the eyes.

A shot rang out, and Finn flinched, anticipating the blow of the ball in his chest.

Instead, an agonized wail rose from Scarlet as he clutched his hand, his pistol now in the dust, unfired.

Finn looked about, searching for his savior. His gaze fell on a tall man dressed in black, sitting a white stallion, hair as red as his own, his face with a grim set as he tucked his smoking pistol away.

“Uncle Abernethy!” Finn shook off Gates and Lackland, who raced forward to see to their lieutenant, and stumbled toward his uncle, wholly dazed by his miraculous escape from death. He gazed up at the man who’d been like a father to him all his life, more grateful for him now than at any other time. “Uncle, by all that is holy, how dae ye come here?”

His uncle dismounted and gave the reins to a groom. “Make certain the beast is well tended.”

The lad stared, speechless, at the imposing figure, nodded and led the horse away as quickly as his legs would take him.

Having satisfactorily dispatched his horse, he turned to Finn. “Good morning, nephew. I ken I arrived just in time for the latest display o’ yer foolishness, although ye’ve improved wi’ a sword since last we met. Ye’d have bested him had the bastard fought fair.”

“Good morning, uncle.” The scolding only served to let Finn know his uncle was proud of him. A tongue-lashing from Uncle Abernethy was the equivalent of a “well done” and a pat on the back. “I am more than grateful tae have ye appear and save my bacon at the penultimate moment. Thank ye.”

Finn wished he could embrace his uncle, but that would not adhere to the man's strict code of conduct for a gentleman.

At that moment, Dora ran up to him panting, and threw her arms around him. "Oh, Finn, Finn." She pressed her mouth to his, and he surrendered to her with a whole heart.

"Ahem." The duchess had joined the little group, her walking stick restored to her. "Dora, as you are neither married nor yet formally betrothed to Lord Aberfoyle, you cannot indulge in these displays of affection in a public place. Your reputation is all but in shreds."

"As if I care about reputation," she mumbled then pressed her mouth to Finn's.

His sentiments exactly.

"Aberfoyle." His uncle's voice broke through Finn's blissful interlude.

Reluctantly, he released Dora, and stood blinking at the little group.

"Aberfoyle, ye're a disgrace tae yer family. Introduce these ladies tae me, if ye please, especially as ye seem tae ken the lass better than ye should show the world." His uncle's brows dipped down toward his nose.

"I beg yer pardon, uncle." Finn got himself in hand. "Duchess and Dora, may I present my uncle, Lord Abernethy? Uncle, this is the Duchess o' Ostroda and her niece, Miss Dora Harper. Miss Harper and I are tae be betrothed."

"Sae I gathered." His uncle gave him a stern glance then softened his features to address the ladies. "Duchess, Miss Harper, I am most glad tae meet ye. My nephew mentioned Miss Harper in his letter tae me, although no' the seriousness o' their relationship."

“At the time I wrote, I dinna believe Miss Harper and I had reached an understanding. Neither was the duchess yet known tae me.” Finn tried to keep his mind on the conversation, but his gaze kept straying to Dora.

“But the betrothal has no’ been announced?”

Finn exchanged an uncomfortable look with Dora. “No’ yet.”

“That is not unusual, my lord, when Lord Aberfoyle has not yet asked for Dora’s hand in marriage.” The duchess stood easily, leaning on her stick, as though totally unaware of the bombshell she’d just lobbed.

“Aberfoyle.” Uncle Abernethy’s stare skewered him. “What are you playing at?”

“My lord.” Lieutenant Scarlet presented himself to Finn’s uncle, his mouth pinched. His hand had been inexpertly bandaged. “I beg your pardon, but I am bound to deliver this man to Major Collins at Nottingham today. He is under arrest for his crime and must be brought to justice.” He glared briefly at Finn then looked away. “If he insists on riding in the duchess’s carriage, I will allow it, but we must make haste as the journey is half a day’s ride.”

“I believe we can dispense with the journey, lieutenant. Lord Aberfoyle is nae longer o’ any concern tae ye.” His uncle fished in his inner coat pocket and withdrew a letter, sealed in blue wax. “I have a letter addressed tae ye from Lord Lieutenant-General Rothés, a friend o’ mine and, like myself, a Scottish Representative Peer.” He handed the letter to Lieutenant Scarlet. “Ye will find he bids ye attend him in London immediately on an errand o’ some importance.”

Scarlet paled, but he popped the seal off and unfolded the missive. As he read, his face grew grim, lips thinned into a straight line, and he swallowed several times convulsively. At last, he refolded the letter and stuffed it in his

pocket. "I thank you for delivering this, my lord. At your service." He bowed curtly to each of them then turned on his heel and strode toward his group of men. After some spirited conversation, they mounted their horses and rode out of the courtyard without a look back.

Dumbfounded, Finn shook his head. "And just like that, I'm free o' this?"

"Just like that." His uncle offered his arm to the duchess. "Would ye join me at breakfast, Duchess?"

"With pleasure, my lord." The duchess took his uncle's arm, gazing up at him with a curious smile on her lips. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

Uncle Abernethy's gaze swept over Finn and Dora, still standing flummoxed. "If ye would like tae ken how ye sae narrowly escaped arrest, Aberfoyle, ye and Miss Harper may accompany us." Not waiting for anyone else to accept his invitation, Uncle Abernethy strode quickly into the inn.

"He's rather a force to be reckoned with, isn't he?" Dora's tone was reverential as she took Finn's arm.

"Ye dinna know the half o' it, my love. But come, I wish tae hear Uncle's tale for myself. I've nae idea how he managed tae dispatch Scarlet." He sighed and started them toward the inn. "I'm only glad he has done sae."

Chapter 26

The morning had just begun and already Dora's heart had been twisted this way and that as though a laundry woman had wrung it out on washing day. To see Finn fighting the odious Lieutenant Scarlet, see him almost shot—she'd believed she would die of fright when the lieutenant had raised his pistol at Finn—and then miraculously saved by the uncle he'd been trying to find, was simply too much for her to comprehend. She clung to Finn's arm, never wanting to let him go again.

They entered the inn just behind his uncle, a most imposing gentleman, and her aunt, Dora still clinging to Finn. "How did your uncle find you? And at the exact opportune moment? How can you tell me it's not a miracle?"

"Och, I can completely believe in an angel sending a miracle tae save me from Scarlet. I even thought it would take the form o' Uncle Abernethy, but through the courts, mind ye, no' with a blazing pistol." He patted her arm and led her back toward her and her aunt's room.

When they entered, the old breakfast things had been whisked away, the room tidied, and a new table laid with fresh, hot food.

Dora took off her shawl and gloves and sat in her accustomed place at the table. She couldn't decide whether she was ravenous or too distraught to eat a thing. Finn sat to her right, Lord Abernethy to the left, and Aunt Mimi across from her.

"I instructed Mr. Perry to serve breakfast once more. If you have eaten your fill already, you may have tea and toast to keep up your end of the table." Aunt Mimi removed her gloves and laid them in her lap. "Now, my lord," she

turned eagerly to Lord Abernethy, “what’s the news? Why did that lieutenant run out of here with his tail between his legs?”

“Perhaps we should allow Lord Abernethy a chance to eat his breakfast, aunt.” Dora was dying to know as well, but one should not be so pointed or insistent when someone was going out of their way to accommodate you.

“I can talk just as well waiting for my breakfast.” His lordship gazed around at them until he landed on Finn. “I’m certain ye have a question or two for me, nephew.”

“Indeed I dae, uncle.” Finn leaned forward, as though he wanted to jump out of the chair. “First, how did ye come tae be here, at this inn, at the precise time tae shoot the pistol out o’ Scarlet’s hand. It seems like more than a coincidence.”

“No’ a coincidence exactly, lad.” His uncle smiled. “I left London three days ago after receiving a letter from Lord Trevor, who I believe ye ken.”

“Tris!” Dora sat up, entranced. She might have known Tris would have a hand in their rescue.

“Trevor? Trevor sent ye a letter?” Finn cocked his head, the puzzled look on his face somewhere between confusion and resentment.

“Yes, he told me o’ yer scheme tae go tae London in the duchess’s carriage, disguised as a woman. A brilliant idea, by the way.” Abernethy shook his head. “By rights, Scarlet shouldna have found ye. Shouldna have been looking for three women traveling together.”

“He was tipped off, my lord.” Dora wanted to confess that bit since her aunt’s carriage was partly responsible for their discovery. “A groom at the

inn where we spent the night before last told him about our next destination and the disguise.”

“Pity there’s nae crime in being disloyal. Wouldna have happened in my day.”

“Mine either, my lord.” Aunt Mimi had been taking in all the interactions, biding her time. “Nothing is as it was half a century ago.”

Impatience flaring, Finn broke in. “Sae Trevor wrote giving ye the locations where we planned tae stop along the way?”

“He did. Else I would still be in my townhouse in London. Trevor’s the reason I set out tae find ye and not just wait for ye tae arrive, as yer letter suggested, Aberfoyle.” Lord Abernethy sat straighter when the door opened and breakfast arrived. “I suppose Trevor is responsible for saving yer life. Otherwise, I’d no’ have been tae hand tae rein in that idiot.”

“I still say it’s a miracle ye arrived in the nick tae shoot his hand.” Finn grabbed Dora’s hand under the table and squeezed. “Another second, and he’d have shot me in the chest.”

“Oh, it wasn’t left up tae much chance, nephew. I arrived just after ye began the fight.” Lord Abernethy sipped his tea, looking for the world as though he were discussing gardening with his nephew.

“Even sae, uncle, I could feel the icy claw o’ death close around me.”

“Nonsense. Ye were rattled because Miss Harper was watching.” His lordship put down his cup and nodded to Finn. “One holds life dearer when one has found the purpose for it. Life becomes more precious because o’ the ones we dinna want tae leave behind.”

Finn looked at Dora with dark, liquid eyes. “I agree, uncle.”

“But here, tell me everything from the beginning. Sae convoluted a

tale I need tae hear from the start, in the correct order sae tae make sense o' it."

As they ate breakfast, Finn and Dora, when her path crossed his, told everything that had happened. It was comforting to know Finn had such a champion, but she didn't wish to ever be on the wrong side of Lord Abernethy.

"Well," his lordship said when they had finished, "Lieutenant Scarlet certainly had the tenacity o' a bulldog. No' at all a bad quality in a good soldier. I wish him luck o' Roth's, but I suspect he'll have none."

"Will he be cashiered?" Dora understood that was one of the most dishonorable things that could happen to a soldier.

"If he's lucky, that's all he will get. He overstepped his authority, which is discouraged in an army officer. He should have kenned better and had he no' been sae far from his regiment, they would have nipped the whole thing in the bud." Lord Abernethy sipped more tea, looking thoughtful. He shook his head. "Had I known about the debauchery he tried tae enact on Miss Harper, I suspect he would have been hung. He is fortunate that his little demonstration didna succeed. Had it done sae, I would follow him tae London and lay all the facts before Roth's. Scarlet would have been flogged for disrespecting a woman and the future Countess o' Aberfoyle, had I anything tae dae wi' it.

"And speaking o' this fictional countess who does no' yet exist, when dae ye intend tae ask for her hand, nephew?" Lord Abernethy frowned deeply at Finn, who suddenly decided to study his plate of food. The marquess then turned his gaze on her, and Dora trembled. "Yer father is Lord Downing, I believe Lord Trevor said in his letter. Is that correct, Miss Harper?"

“Yes, my lord. I am his youngest daughter.” Tris had been quite the chatterer to Lord Abernethy. What else might he have mentioned?

“Is he in London?” His lordship peered at Finn. “If sae, ye can take the most expedient road and ask for her as soon as we reach Town.”

Dora, Finn, and Aunt Mimi exchanged a look.

“What was that about?” The marquess’s eyes narrowed. “What else have ye no’ told me?”

“The reason I went to Dora in Yorkshire, my lord,” Aunt Mimi eyed her and Finn, “was to inform her that her father was in the process of arranging a marriage for her with Sir Harry Walters. Before this information could be imparted to her, she and Lord Aberfoyle had fallen in love and planned to marry.”

“We still dae, uncle.” Straightening his back, Finn stuck out his chin. That always made him look particularly fierce. “We dinna care what her father says, we will marry.”

“Indeed?” Lord Abernethy dug a quizzer out of this jacket and proceeded to look Finn and Dora up and down. “And how dae ye propose tae dae that? I assume Miss Harper has no’ reached her majority yet, and therefore will need her parent’s permission.”

Dora nodded slowly. The marquess was trying to intimidate her, and she wouldn’t let that happen. *Seize the moment.* “I believe your next objection or observation will be that I will have no dowry if I marry against my father’s wishes. That is true, I will not receive a dime from him. However, my grandmother, who I was named after, left me quite a substantial fortune. I need only to wait until I achieve my majority, and I will inherit her fortune and properties. My father cannot touch or control that money, as it was put in

trust for me years ago.” She smiled sweetly at Lord Abernethy. “So if you think Finn and I can live on his estates’ income for the next few years, we will reap the benefits of my grandmother’s generosity eventually.”

Lord Abernethy studied her for some minutes, until Dora began to get uncomfortable under his gaze. “Aberfoyle, I approve. Ye have chosen wisely. If ye can arrange the marriage either with Lord Downing or without him, ye have my full blessing.”

“Thank ye, uncle!” Finn beamed first at him then at Dora. He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. “I ken he would approve o’ ye, *mo gradh*.”

“That being said, nephew, what are the chances o’ Lord Downing approving yer suit?” His uncle sipped tea, the beverage of everyone experiencing a crisis.

“I’m afraid those odds are exceedingly long, my lord. I can tell you I would not take them.” Aunt Mimi spoke up.

“In which case, my lord, aunt,” Dora squeezed the arms of her chair, trying to buck up her courage. “I suggest we bypass my father completely, leave here today and travel to Scotland. We could marry there, where I will need nothing save two witnesses and someone to marry us.” She gazed around the stunned table. “Well?”

“I would have nae problem whatsoever with that plan.” Thankfully, Finn rushed to support her. “For us tae be married at Aberfoyle would be my fondest wish.”

“It is a scandalous move, Dora.” Aunt Mimi stirred her tea rather briskly. “One that would taint both your marriage and your family’s reputation. And while your father’s conduct toward you all these years might

argue that he deserves whatever recriminations would be heaped upon his head, your poor mother does not.”

Dora dropped her gaze to her still-full breakfast plate. There was some truth to that. Mamma had often supported her in small ways at home. Her mother had not championed Dora when Father and Simon had browbeaten her, but neither had she had the active animosity toward her that her father and brother had. And Dora would be the last child wed. Her mother might feel it keenly if she missed it. “That may be true, Aunt Mimi, but I must weigh that against the very real possibility that if given the chance, Father will refuse Finn’s suit and insist that I marry Sir Harry.” She stared straight at her aunt. She knew Dora’s father as well as Dora did. “You cannot deny he might do it simply to spite me.”

“Oh, yes, Melchior is as vindictive a man as I have ever met. His sending you to Yorkshire alone as punishment is an excellent example.” Aunt Mimi sniffed. “I therefore think it a delightful turn of events that you have fallen in love with a worthy gentleman because you were simply in the right place at the right time. Your father will be completely incensed.” She smiled viciously. “I, for one, would pay good money to see his face when that is pointed out to him.”

“I have nae acquaintance with Lord Downing,” Lord Abernethy addressed himself to Dora, “however, I will make clear tae him the many advantages o’ your marriage tae my nephew. He’d be a fool tae turn it down.”

“I give you warning, Melchior has been known to act foolishly.” The duchess cut her eyes at Dora, and something predatory in them made her grasp Finn’s hand. “However, I am in possession of information that you may be able to use to convince the stubborn man it would be in his best interests to

agree to the marriage.” Pursing her lips, she glared directly at Dora. “And quickly if he wishes to avoid scandal.” Frowning, Finn leaned over to whisper in Dora’s ear, “What is she talking about?”

Dora shook her head then dropped it to her chest to hide her face, turning red even before her aunt spoke. “That evening at The Red Lion,” she whispered.

“What information is that, Duchess?” Lord Abernethy sounded suspicious, and with good cause.

“That my niece and your nephew, once they had pledged themselves, felt no compunction against anticipating their wedding night.”

Dora’s face was on fire to the tips of her ears. “Aunt Mimi, what are you saying? That’s simply not—”

“And I have no doubt the instance I have knowledge of was not the only time they have done so.”

Wincing as if receiving a blow, Dora put her hands over her blazing face. Oh, what must Lord Abernethy think of her? And it wasn’t even true. “Finn!” she whispered at him. “Tell them we did nothing.”

“Duchess,” Finn began, “I think ye misunderstood—”

“Excellent!” The glee in his lordship’s voice brought Dora’s head up.

She sent a confused look to Finn, who shrugged and shook his head. “Why is that a good thing, uncle?”

“Because even though Downing may no’ wish the marriage tae go forward, he will wish even less for that scandal tae get about. If his daughter is increasing, he will have nae choice but tae let ye marry.” With a jaunty smile, Abernethy drained his tea.

“Increasing?” The shock made Dora’s voice into a squeak.

“Dinna think about that, sweetheart.” Putting his arm around her shoulders, Finn pulled her close. “It matters no’ if ye carry my child. We will be married long ere that becomes a consideration.”

“But the prospect that you are increasing is why you will not need to elope to Scotland.” Her aunt had a most satisfied smile on her face. “If your father believed you were unmarriageable because you jilted Lord Trevor, how much more would you be now that you’ve taken a lover?”

Flinching at that bald statement, Dora wanted nothing more than to race through the bedroom door and burrow beneath the covers. Ignore everything that was happening until she could make some sense of it. Too much had occurred this morning for her to comprehend it all.

“So we are in accord, Lord Abernethy?” Aunt Mimi buttered a bit of toast and slathered it with marmalade, just as if she were eating a leisurely breakfast at home. Not deciding the Fate of Dora’s life to come.

“We are, Duchess. Shall I write tae Lord Downing or will ye?”

“I will write to him and draw him from Wiltshire back to London with talk of the impending marriage.” Her aunt’s eyes twinkled. “I simply will not specify who Dora is reputedly marrying. Once he is in Town, you and your nephew will call upon him, make him cognizant of the facts, and arrange for settlements to be signed.”

Dora had known her aunt possessed a wide streak of deviousness, but never had it been so apparent as now. One had to wonder if she’d given her and Finn that evening together on purpose to gain this advantage.

“An admirable ambush, Duchess.” The look of esteem in Lord Abernethy’s eyes was tinged with something else as well. Something much warmer, it seemed. “I will be most happy tae be able tae claim kinship wi’

ye.”

Aunt Mimi’s cheeks pinkened, but she tossed her head and finished her toast. “Our next task will be to keep these two from repeating their indiscretion until their vows are spoken.”

“I see nae reason we should be sae restrained,” Finn spoke up quickly. “As we will be married, one way or the other, why does it matter what we dae?”

Dora’s ears perked up. That was true. Even if she and Finn hadn’t anticipated their wedding night, if her aunt and his uncle thought they had, it shouldn’t matter what they did now.

“Because we live in a civilized society, young man.” Her aunt’s voice rang out crisply. “And while it is necessary for Dora’s father to know you have anticipated the wedding, it is imperative that no one else does. And if you continue to meet freely, Society will not only suspect, but they will also gossip about such scandalous behavior. Would you like for Dora’s image to be caricatured and published in every scandal sheet in Town?”

Dora shuddered, and Finn shook his head violently. “Nae, nae. Never would we want that tae happen.” He sighed and took her hand. “We’ll need tae restrain ourselves, my love.” Then lowered his voice to a whisper. “Or be very, very careful.”

“I believe these negotiations are complete then.” Aunt Mimi rose, bringing everyone else to their feet. “We will leave for London immediately. Once there, Dora and I will reside at my townhouse, pending her father’s arrival. I assume Lord Aberfoyle will reside with you, my lord, unless he has his own establishment in Town?”

“The lad can stay with me in Belgravia. Best tae have him underfoot

where I can keep an eye on him. Once we speak tae Downing, we can proceed with the wedding plans.” Lord Abernethy bowed. “I am delighted tae have met ye, Duchess. I look forward tae working with ye closely on this little scheme. Quite a diversion from my usual political activities.”

“Delighted as well, my lord.” Aunt Mimi sent the marquess a flirtatious glance. “I look forward to our next meeting with great anticipation.”

Dora and Finn exchanged a scandalized look, but the marquess strode out of the parlor and Aunt Mimi turned to them.

“The carriage should be readied, and we must be off. London and your future await.” She swept from the room, calling back over her shoulder, “Come along, the both of you. *Tempus fugit.*”

Chapter 27

“Absolutely out of the question.” Lord Downing was living up to his reputation as far as Finn could see. The little rotund man in the gray wig—a replica of the one Finn had worn when impersonating the viscount at Bromley—had grudgingly agreed to see Finn and his uncle. Now, having laid his suit before the blustery man, he could see why Dora had held out little hope he would agree to the marriage.

“My nephew is a most eligible *parti*, Lord Downing.” The man had tried Uncle Abernethy’s soul from the moment they arrived and were shown into a small, dim receiving room. “He is more than financially sound—I was his guardian and in charge o’ the purse strings from the time he inherited the title at age eight until he reached his majority four years ago. Despite his youth, Aberfoyle is as steady as they come, nae vices tae speak o’, and he has a genuine fondness for yer daughter. There is nae sound argument ye can give that he is no’ a perfectly acceptable suitor.”

“I will determine who is and who is not an acceptable candidate for my daughter’s hand, Abernethy.” Downing strode to the sideboard, poured a small amount into a glass, and drank it down. No invitation to join him was forthcoming. Inwardly, Finn ached for what Dora must have had to put up with for so many years. “After much deliberation, I have decided on a man of impeccable character, with strong ties to our family, who will take my willful daughter in hand and make certain she is cared for and protected from her own undisciplined actions.”

Scotland was beginning to look like their only option. They’d already been here an hour, and Downing wasn’t budging a bit.

"If ye mean Sir Harry Walters, my lord, I think ye may have been misinformed." Uncle Abernethy sat, hands on his cane, impassive as stone.

"Why do you think I speak of Sir Harry?" Downing whirled around to face them.

"Let us say I take care tae put my ear tae the ground and listen tae what people say." Uncle had a knack for gathering information, true. He'd been inquiring about Sir Harry from the moment they arrived in Town. "What I have learned does no' agree with yer estimation o' the man."

"Do you malign Sir Harry's reputation?" Downing puffed out his chest like a bantam rooster.

"I dinna dae that, my lord. However, on behalf o' my nephew, I have looked intae Sir Harry's bona fides and I must say he is no' what he may seem." Uncle looked down his nose at the viscount.

"What can you have heard? I only met Sir Harry when I was in London, just last month. Lord Swindon introduced us."

"Swindon?" His uncle sniffed. "No' 'tall surprised then. A more thoroughly despicable man I've ne'er met. Sir Harry's no' in that league, thank God, but still he's got some shade in his past. Did ye ken he's been widowed three times?"

That took Finn by surprise. His ears perked up. No one should have so many wives, save Henry the Eighth.

"Well, no." Downing's mouth twitched, and he glanced away. "I knew he was widowed, but I believed only the once."

"Sadly, the first was killed by a runaway carriage. She and Sir Harry had only been married a year. He said he loved her and regretted they hadn't had children, but he married within a month o' the woman's death."

Terribly hasty to wed so soon after such a tragic death. Especially when there were no little ones to have to look out for.

“The second one died in childbirth, with her second child.”

“Well, there’s no fault to that, my lord.” Lord Downing came to sit across from Finn and his uncle.

“Likely no’. But it was her second child in eighteen months.”

“Egad.” Startled, the expression slipped out of Finn’s mouth. How unkind to his wife.

“Sir Harry apparently wishes for masses and masses o’ children. He came from a family o’ fourteen and believes it is his duty tae populate the world.”

Scowling, Downing sipped his drink. “I suppose the third wife died in childbed as well?”

“Nae, she apparently tripped going down a flight o’ stairs. Broke her neck.”

Wincing, Finn glanced from his uncle to Lord Downing’s shocked face. Sir Harry’s wives certainly had some of the worst luck imaginable. How could Downing countenance sending his daughter off to what would probably be a death sentence?

“Poor lady.” Uncle Abernethy shook his head. “They too had been married about a year. Also without being blessed with children.”

A sickening realization had Finn ready to leap up, grab Dora, and head for the Scottish border. He’d never allow her to marry this madman and end up constantly breeding or dead of a well-timed accident. “My lord,” Finn rose and stood before Dora’s father, “I have every intention o’ making yer daughter happy for the rest o’ her life, if ye will allow me t’ dae sae. Whatever

ye require in the way o' settlements, my uncle will see tae it."

"I still do not believe Sir Harry—"

"What my nephew has neglected tae tell ye, my lord, likely from the embarrassment o' the situation, is that he and yer daughter contracted a match some weeks ago."

Covering his face with his hand, Finn turned away from Lord Downing. He'd hoped his uncle would not have to divulge his and Dora's faux indiscretion, but if Downing was still dead set on Sir Harry even after that scathing indictment of the man he'd just heard, it was time for desperate measures.

"That's no concern of mine, Lord Abernethy." A sneer appeared on Downing's face. "My daughter has not reached her majority and therefore cannot sanction her marriage to anyone."

"Perhaps no'. However, both yer daughter and my nephew have confessed that on the strength o' that contract, they anticipated the wedding night," his uncle stared into Downing's unhappy face, "*several times* in the ensuing weeks. We are awaiting news noo as tae whether or no' Miss Harper is, in fact, increasing with a child that could be my nephew's heir."

The more his uncle talked, the narrower Lord Downing's eyes became until they were mere slits spitting loathing at Finn. "Nevertheless, I have, in good faith, given my word to Sir Harry."

Uncle Abernethy rose, tall and imposing. "I'm certain, should the word get out about the young couple's scandalous liaison and Miss Harper's 'interesting condition,' that Sir Harry will be verra forgiving o' her, with her ruined reputation. And the child she would bear who would no' be o' his getting."

Downing rose, his face florid to the point of apoplexy. “Fine, let the two marry. I’ll be certain to get my pound of flesh in the settlements.”

Letting out a breath he seemed to have been holding for hours, Finn had to restrain himself from shouting to the rafters. A moment before, he’d all but lost hope, the man had seemed so determined to marry Dora to Sir Harry. Thank goodness and his uncle’s unblinking countenance, he and Dora could look forward to a wonderful life together.

“I’ll call around tomorrow about the settlements.” Uncle Abernethy bowed, a slight smile on his lips. “Meanwhile, Aberfoyle and I will apply at the Archbishop o’ Canterbury’s office tae acquire a special license. I believe the couple means tae marry as soon as possible.”

“That they will not.” Lord Downing looked up at his uncle, a fierceness in his stance.

“I beg yer pardon?” Finn would have thought the last thing Downing would have wanted was a protracted courtship.

“I said you will not marry in haste and have everyone know your shame. Those who marry by special licenses do so for this very reason in most cases. I will not have my daughter’s reputation sullied with a trumped-up wedding.” He swayed a little from foot to foot. “A proper wedding at St. George’s Hanover, that’s what she’ll have. With the banns read for three Sundays beforehand.” He wagged a finger at Finn. “Mark me, Aberfoyle, not one day before that final Sunday. If you want my permission, you will dance to my tune.”

On the verge of telling Downing something he’d rather not hear, Finn was surprised to find his shoulder clamped in a vise-grip as his uncle began to drag him from the room. “Verra well, Lord Downing. I will attend ye at, shall

we say, ten o'clock tomorrow for the settlements? My nephew will then busy himself with acquiring a wedding suit that will dae yer daughter credit. Until then, good day, my lord."

Before he knew it, Finn was whisked into this uncle's carriage, and they were en route to the duchess's townhouse in Mayfair. When they were announced by the duchess's ancient butler, Finn wanted to hurry to Dora's side, but his uncle kept him right by him, as he greeted the duchess.

"Good afternoon, Lord Abernethy. You and Lord Aberfoyle have just come from Lord Downing's house, I take it." The woman eyed them keenly. "And is everything settled to our satisfaction?"

"Indeed it is, Duchess." Uncle Abernethy nodded.

"Please be seated, my lord. I want you to tell me everything but let me order tea first. Dora, call William."

"Yes, Aunt Mimi. Good afternoon, Lord Abernethy." Dora curtsied then sidled over to Finn. "Good afternoon, my lord."

God, but the shape of her mouth as she said the word "lord" was an invitation to ravish it if ever he saw one. But one couldn't very well start kissing a woman—even the woman one was going to marry—in a public room with others present. They needed to find a more private place. "Good afternoon, Miss Harper." He peered over his shoulder at his uncle and the duchess, now deep in conversation. "We must talk in private."

"I do not think Aunt Mimi will allow me to be alone with you. She spent the morning demanding I deport myself as befits my station, by which I'm sure she meant we cannot see one another or be more intimate until we are married. But my father has agreed that we can marry?"

"Yes, praise God. But it took us forever tae convince him."

“Oh, Finn.” Dora flung herself into his arms. “That is wonderful. In two days, I will go from being almost a countess to Countess of Aberfoyle. Your wife, Finn, just think of it.” She snuggled against his chest, creating an agony in his breeches.

“Aye, my love, ye’ll be that for certain. In a little while.” He cringed as he spoke, but he had to tell her. “Yer father agreed tae the marriage but wants us tae be married at St. George’s in Hanover Square, after the banns are read.”

Slowly, Dora peeled herself off him, coming to stand in front of him, a deep scowl darkening her lovely face. “After the banns— But this is Monday. That means it will be three weeks before we can be married.”

“But we *can* marry, Dora. That is the main thing.” He must be as positive about the situation as he could be. He didn’t want to upset his bride-to-be, although that horse seemed to have left the barn. Tension thrummed through every part of her, her fingers clenched into fists as she stood before him.

“Finn. How can we be in one another’s company for three long weeks without a private touch or kiss?” She looked so woebegone he wanted to take her in his arms and make all her hurts go away.

“I dinna ken, love. But I dae ken it will be hard.” As he was right now. Just being in her presence made his flesh rigid. When he looked at her mouth—well, he likely shouldn’t do that too often until they were married. “Perhaps we can find a time and place we can meet, happen upon one another, as it were, and steal away for some little pleasure together. Three weeks isna an eternity.”

“It will feel like one, Finn.” Her bottom lip began to quiver. “I almost

lost you a few days ago. I want to be with you forever. Beginning today.” She sniffed. “I don’t think I can wait.”

Biting back a groan, Finn managed not to embarrass himself, but Lord, he had to explain to Dora that men couldn’t always control themselves when they were in the presence of very desirable ladies, especially those they were taking as their wives. He’d wanted to wait until they were married, but he’d had no idea their nuptials would be put off so long. There was only so much restraint a man could take. “Who might be willing tae help us arrange a tryst?”

“Aunt Mimi told me my sister-in-law Judith is in town with her new husband and child. She always championed me when Simon was cruel. And she has no love for my father after he tried to take her child away.” Dora smiled at last. “I believe that, to thwart my father’s wishes alone, Judith would agree to help us.”

Finn glanced at his uncle and the duchess, still deep in conference. Good. He hoped they would continue their assignation for some time to come. He’d spotted a likely dark corner just down the corridor. If Dora could tiptoe away, perhaps they could enjoy a few stolen minutes together. If only he could be convincing.

He turned and bowed to the duchess. “If ye will excuse me, Duchess, I must repair tae the necessary.”

“Of course, Lord Aberfoyle. The footman outside can direct you.”

“I can show him, Aunt Mimi.” Dora came forward eagerly. Too eagerly, it seemed.

“You will do no such thing, Dora. Come, sit by me and when Lord Aberfoyle returns, we can begin to plan your wedding. Three weeks is

scarcely enough time.” She raised an eyebrow. “When I begin to think about it, there is so much to plan and do, I believe we will need at the least six weeks to make it the wedding of the Little Season.”

Dora looked aghast. “But Aunt Mimi—”

“Or do you think we should take our time and make it eight weeks?”

The duchess tapped her finger against her lips, as if thinking.

A look of horror in her eyes, Dora hastened to appease her aunt. “Oh, I am sure you and I can accomplish the perfect wedding in six weeks, Aunt Mimi.”

Inwardly, Finn groaned as Dora sat on the sofa beside her aunt, her face a study in misery. As he left the room, he vowed he and Dora would find a way to thwart those who would keep them apart until their wedding. *To him that will, ways are not wanting.* It was fast becoming his favorite proverb.

Chapter 28

As Dora had suspected, the six weeks wore on interminably. More than once, she wished with all her heart that she and Finn had eloped to Scotland, where they would have been married by now and blissfully sharing pleasures every night—every day, too, if she had her way. It was unbelievably unfair to them that they would have to continue to wait to be together. Everyone, according to Larkin, who did indeed seem to know everything, anticipated their wedding night. Now that Finn was no longer a wanted man, there seemed no reason at all for them not to indulge in conjugal bliss. Each evening she went to bed brooding over their missed opportunity at The Red Lion, her hunger for Finn’s touch growing as she tossed and turned until she fell asleep from exhaustion that was anything but satisfying.

Ever since her aunt had extended the wedding date, Dora had tried time and again to arrange a tryst for them, but so far, they had been thwarted at every turn.

She’d visited Judith and broached the subject to her of providing a haven for them to enjoy a few hours together alone. Her sister-in-law was completely understanding. In fact, she arranged a tea for Dora and Finn with the intent that they could meet in an outwardly respectable manner and then slip away to one of the guest rooms for a private rendezvous.

The plan went off famously—until Aunt Mimi arrived unannounced and uninvited. Dora had been on the brink of excusing herself to lie down as she had been “overcome” with the stress of planning her wedding trousseau, when the butler announced her aunt.

Determined to outwait the woman, Dora had drunk an ocean of tea

and eaten two stone of biscuits and cakes waiting for the duchess to leave. But when at last her aunt rose, it was to demand Dora go home with her. She tried her best to demur, but the writing was on the wall. She managed one chaste kiss from Finn before her aunt took her arm and led her from the room.

They had attempted the same strategy on other days, even going so far as to put out false claims of Dora going shopping or driving in the park, but the duchess must have had spies following Dora for whenever she managed to get to Judith's home, Aunt Mimi was never far behind.

"I'm not even certain why she's doing this, Judith." Dora took up her second cup of tea and sipped, the warm beverage soothing her like a comfortable rest before a fire. She'd come here today without any expectations save companionship with Judith. Finn would not be present, so she hadn't even dressed in her best, wearing instead her comfortable old red gown. "We will be married within weeks. Finn is no longer in danger from the law, so we may assume the wedding will take place. After all our travail with Lieutenant Scarlet and my father, I truly think we deserve an afternoon together."

"I quite agree with you, my dear." Judith sipped her tea and smiled, cutting her gaze toward the door for the second time in a quarter of an hour. "I think it has been so unfortunate that you and Lord Aberfoyle have not been able to spend more time together. Young couples need to get to know one another better."

"Exactly." Her sister-in-law had ever been her champion at home. "Even a little time together before the wedding would be heavenly. For once we are married, we will have so much else to consider. I will be running a strange household. Finn will be running his estates and all that entails. We

will not have the leisure time we do now, if only we could use it to be together and simply enjoy one another's company."

"I so agree. It wasn't like that for me when I married Simon, for I wasn't going to be mistress of the house for some time to come. Now, though, I do have, exactly as you say, much to keep me busy." Judith's eyes twinkled. "But I will admit, John and I will always find a way to make time for one another."

"You seem so very happy, Judith. I cannot tell you how glad I am that you married John." After the horror of her marriage to Dora's brother, Judith deserved the loving and steadfast man she had married just this summer.

"I do wish our bower would stay in bloom the entire year. It was a wonderful place for us to go whenever we wished to be private." Her sister-in-law sighed. "You and Lord Aberfoyle would have found it quite an oasis from all the hubbub of the wedding plans. Such a pity its blooms are gone." She wrinkled her nose. "It is scarcely private at all now." Again, her gaze strayed to the door.

"Are you expecting someone, Judith? Is Aunt Mimi coming today as well? Her spies should have told her that Finn is on some errand with his uncle." Truly, her aunt seemed to know every move either she or Finn made. "Our marriage will account for a rise in unemployed workers once my aunt no longer has to pay people to follow us."

Judith cocked her head, as if listening for something, then laughed, her eyes suddenly bright. "I think we may have a chance to speed your happiness, my dear."

The door opened, and Barr announced, "Lord Aberfoyle, my lady."

Dora jumped to her feet, nearly overturning the tea tray, ran to Finn

and threw her arms around his neck. “Finn! I thought you were engaged with your uncle today.”

“I thought sae as well, but he was suddenly called away tae some business in the Lords.” He kissed her lips, his closeness like a balm to her frazzled nerves. “Isn’t yer aunt here?”

“She has been invited to tea by the wife of a friend of mine and John.” Judith rose and came toward them. “She will take the opportunity to beg your aunt’s patronage for a newfound charity for fallen women, called The House of Hope. I believe Lady Matthews is most passionate about the cause, so your aunt will likely be detained for some time.” Judith went to the door and peered into the corridor. “Come with me.”

Excitement making her toes curl in her silk slippers, Dora took Finn’s hand and followed Judith up the front staircase and down a dim corridor to a small but comfortable room, done in pretty blues and greens. A cozy fire blazed in the grate while a wide four-poster mahogany bed took up most of the room, its blue and green plaid comforter and crisp white sheets turned down invitingly.

“I believe you will be undisturbed for at least two hours if you care to avail yourself of the peaceful atmosphere of our guest room.” Judith smiled as she shut the door, leaving Dora and Finn alone for the first time in weeks.

The door had scarcely clicked shut when Dora grasped Finn’s face and covered it with kisses. “Oh, my love, I’ve missed you so. Missed doing this.” She punctuated each word with a kiss, wanting to do more. Finally able to do everything she wanted with the man she loved.

“Two hours will fly by, lass.” He kissed her long and hard then let her go to peel off his jacket. “We must take advantage o’ every moment, mustn’t

we?” He paused, peering into her face. “Are ye certain ye wish tae dae this now? ’Tis only a few more weeks—”

“No, Finn, we will not wait another momente.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed him firmly. “Not unless you do not wish it until we are married. You had said that before, and I will abide by it.” She barely grazed his lips with hers. “Even though I think we have waited long enough.”

“Then by all means, *mo chridhe*.” He seized her mouth, his hunger for her more insistent than ever before. Pressing his tongue deep into her mouth, Finn pulled her so close his stiff member eagerly prodded the folds of her gown.

For the first time, a trickle of doubt assailed her, and she shivered.

“There is nothing tae fear, my love.”

“I know.” Still, she’d heard enough about the first time a woman lay with her husband from her sisters and Judith to make her tremble. She rubbed her arms, a sudden chill setting the hairs on end. No. She wanted this.

Finn jerked at the knot of his cravat, sending the scrap of silk fluttering to the floor. His hands working impossibly fast, he doffed his jacket, unbuttoned his waistcoat, and began on his fall as Dora stood rooted to the spot, staring as he stripped before her. He gazed into her face, his eyes glinting darkly in the candlelight. “Fair’s fair, *mo leannan*,” he smiled and reached for her, “now let me see ye disrobe. Ye’ve had all the fun sae far.”

Heat flooded her cheeks, but Dora told herself she could do this. It wasn’t that she didn’t wish to make love to her almost-husband, but she’d never undressed in front of a man before. Still, there must be a first time for everything. With unsteady hands, she began to unhook her bodice, which closed in the front. The old red gown had always been easy to put on and take

off, the perfect thing for when she'd not had Larkin and had to shift for herself. Today, however, every finger was a thumb.

"Allow me, love." Finn had dropped his breeches to the floor and stood before her in nothing but a thin linen shirt.

She stared at him and swallowed hard. The chemise fit him tightly across the shoulders and chest, displaying every muscle. A dark shadow in the center ran straight down his stomach, until the material dropped away. Only it didn't. Something was poking the fabric out. She didn't have to guess what that was. Dora dragged her gaze back up to Finn's face to find him grinning widely.

"Ye can look yer fill, lass. I dinna mind at all." He reached for the line of hooks and eyes where she'd stopped, too entranced by him to continue. "But I'd like tae dae the same."

Dora nodded, and let him finish the job until her bodice lay open, revealing her cream corset. Shrugging, she worked her arms out of the sleeves and the garment went tumbling to the floor. She then started at the top of the corset, unlacing in long hand-over-hand strokes, as she'd done a thousand times before. This time, however, was different.

Finn slipped his hands around her waist and turned her. Her lower clothing loosened then fell next to Finn's until she stood in her chemise, all but naked before a man. Then his lips grazed the nape of her neck. Dora gasped then arched in invitation. He continued kissing all the way down the side of her neck, and her knees would have buckled had Finn not still had his hands fastened to her waist. Chills shot down her spine each time his lips touched her flesh.

Her corset hit the floor and her chemise swung free, the thinnest of

barriers between their bodies.

Finn pulled her against him, her back pressed to his chest, and she reveled in the heat that seared her all over. The prodding presence had made itself known again, an insistent force that fit all too neatly into the contours of her body.

“Relax and lean into me.”

Closing her eyes, she did as he bid her, and Finn began to rock them gently, his member sliding up between them. A strange and wonderful sensation started building at her core. She leaned her head against his shoulder, allowing herself to enjoy the sensation of his closeness.

Then his hands slid up to cup her breasts, and Dora cried out at the surge of heat that shot straight to her nether regions.

“Easy, love. Just enjoy it.” He stroked around her flesh, not skin to skin, though they could have been, her gown was so sheer. Next, he encircled her nipples with his fingers, drawing them into hard points that ached with the need for his touch, with the need for something else.

Dora moaned and ground her head into his shoulder. She wanted something, needed... “I need something, Finn. I...I don’t know what, but I need it now.”

“Shh, all right. ’Twill be all right.” He scooped her up, carried her to the bed, and laid her down on the cool sheets that had been turned down. “Let’s get rid o’ this, shall we?” In one fluid motion, he pulled his shirt over his head, revealing his splendid naked body.

Trying to look everywhere at once, Dora panted as though she’d been running a race. Her imaginings of what lay beneath his shirt had not done him justice. She’d seen drawings of Greek statues in books at home, but Finn put

them all to shame.

“And noo yers.”

Dora’s face must have turned every color of red, and she clutched the shift to her.

“Dinna be afraid, love.” He kissed her, and the embarrassment lessened a little. “Trust me. Ye dinna need tae hide yer beauty from me. I sae want tae see yer glorious body, feel yer softness all over.” Raising the gown to her hips, he then skimmed his hands along her sides, dragging the cloth upward until it was suddenly pooled around her neck. Her arms had come out of the garment of their own accord and the cool air of the room kissed her all over. “Lift yer head noo.”

She complied, and her body was free.

At some point, she had no idea when, Finn had joined her on the bed. Now he sat back and gazed at her, the love and tenderness in his face melting her heart. “Ye are the most beautiful woman, Dora.” He grasped her ankles then slipped his palms gradually up to her knees, subtly pushing her legs open as he went. “Yer hair, yer face, yer breasts....” Leaning over her, he kissed first one breast then the other, making her whimper as streaks of fire shot straight to her core. “Such sweet nipples ye have, lass.” He grazed one with his teeth, and she gasped, almost coming up off the bed.

“Finn. Dear God.”

“Shhh.” His lips nibbled at her pebbling flesh, making her hips move upward, seeking something only he could give her. “Almost, love.”

He lay fully on top of her now, their skin touching everywhere in the most sensual moment of her life. Even his weight upon her aroused her like nothing she’d ever known. He continued kissing her breasts, laving them then

sucking on her nipples until she thought she'd go mad with the pleasure of it. Still, she knew there was more, and she wanted it more than anything. "Finn?"

"Aye, my love." He rose over her and peered down into her face. "Ye know what I will dae noo, dinna ye?"

Embarrassed, she looked away, but nodded. She'd had talks with Judith when she was supposed to marry Tris. Her sister-in-law had been more forthcoming about what happened in the marriage bed than her mother had been but knowing what would happen was a far cry from experiencing it firsthand. Despite the fear, however, she was ready. Dora gazed into his dark eyes. "I know, and I want you too, Finn. I want you."

"And I ye, sweetheart." He raised his hips and settled them between her thighs. "I'll be quick in the beginning, tae get the pain over with."

She nodded and braced herself as he positioned himself at the apex of her thighs. For a moment, there was the sensation of something large and hot prodding her opening then Finn thrust himself forward. Dora stifled a cry as a sharp pain filled her. A burning sensation spread inside her but was quickly consumed by the strange feeling of fullness. She let out the breath she'd been holding, hoping the dull ache would soon subside.

"Did that hurt badly, my love?" Finn's brows were furrowed, his gaze riveted to her.

Although she wanted to nod—the pain was still making itself known—Dora shook her head. "Not too badly."

"Let's see if I can make it feel better." He eased himself out of her, another peculiar feeling, to be sure, then slowly filled her again.

The second time hurt less, and when Finn kissed her on the next thrust, there was no pain at all.

“See if ye can wrap yer legs around me, sweetheart.” Finn kept the rhythm of his strokes slow as she complied. “That’s right, now raise yer bottom when I come intae ye.”

That was a little trickier, until she found the way of it. Suddenly they were moving together as though they were of one mind, one body. She rose to meet his every thrust, each one more insistent than the last. An urgency began to grow deep inside her, a different kind of ache forming at her core. She moaned, seeking to soothe that ache somehow, but it refused to be satisfied. “Oh, Finn.”

He smiled down at her, delight in his face. Then, without warning, he sped up his thrusting, until Dora panted to keep up with him. The ache began to coil tighter and tighter, as if it were a spring needing release. “Oh lord, Finn.”

With a groan, he reached down and touched her, just as they thrust together.

Dora shrieked as the coiling ache flew apart inside her. Beyond her control, her body grasped Finn’s member, and wave after glorious wave of pleasure cascaded through her.

“Dora...Dora!” Suddenly Finn pushed forward inside her, his head thrown back, mouth open as he strained into her then slumped on top of her.

Gulping in air, Dora lay stunned by all the sensations bombarding her. Her body still cradled Finn within it, though his fullness was retreating. His weight on her was comforting, just because she wanted to remain close to him. “Finn?”

With a groan, he rolled off her, pulling out of her in the process. “Dora, my God. Ye’ve done for me.”

“Please don’t say that, my love.” She snuggled against his shoulder. “I was hoping for a repeat performance.”

His groan turned into a growl. “Truly? I dinna hurt ye too badly?”

She shook her head. “It hurt at first, but I forgot all about it very quickly.” She raised a brow at him. “What did you do to make me shatter like that?”

“Ye liked that, did ye, love?” A self-satisfied grin split his face.

“You must know I did.” She slid her hand across his chest, unable to get enough of him.

“I’d rather no’ tell ye.” He raised her hand and kissed it.

“Why?” She rose on her elbow to frown at him.

He grinned as he pushed her gently onto her back. “Because I’d much rather show ye.”

Dora wrapped her arms around Finn, her sheath still pulsing around his already shrinking member. As her breathing slowed, he rolled off her and lay panting until finally he turned his head toward her. “I dinna know about ye, love, but for me, that was truly worth waitin’ for.”

She giggled and nodded. “We’re lucky we didn’t have to wait longer. I never thought I’d get away from Aunt Mimi.”

Finn laughed and put an arm behind his head. “If Lady Haxby had no’ come up with this plan, I was thinking about just kidnapping ye for a day, so I could finally be with ye.”

“Well, thank goodness you didn’t have to resort to that. I was hoping your life of crime was behind you.” She stroked his chest, playing with the coarse auburn hairs that covered it. “I love you, Finn. I love how good you

make me feel. How loved you make me feel.”

“Och, Dora.” He pulled her to his side and wrapped his arms around her. “I love ye, too, lass. With my whole heart, with my entire being. I canna imagine what my life would have been like had I no’ found ye.”

“I found you, if you remember.” She rubbed her face against his chest, the hairs tickling her cheek.

“That’s no’ what I meant. Ye found me at the burn, but I found a new part o’ my life.” He stroked her hair, her cheek, clasping her as though he’d never let go. “Most men wait until they’re older tae marry and settle down, and I thought I’d be one o’ those. But when I met ye, almost from the beginning, I wanted only ye. I canna imagine trying tae live my life with someone else or without ye.” He gazed down at her, the love shining in his eyes making her heart thunder in her chest. “Ye are the one who makes me whole.”

The love that poured into her from this man, washed over her, and through her, was like nothing she’d ever felt before from anyone. Tears trickled down her face. She loved him as she had loved no one else in the world. He was the key to her happiness for the rest of her life. And he belonged to her.

“Make me whole again, Finn. Make me part of you.”

“That will be my greatest pleasure, my love.” He kissed her as he moved them to the center of the big bed. “Today and every day o’ our lives.”

Epilogue

Although she'd not admit it to anyone, Dora loved being married at St. George's. The huge church, the family gathered to share in her happiness, her groom, looking so fashionable next to his uncle, who stood a head taller than him, gave her a secret pleasure. What really stopped her heart, however, was the sight of Finn, outfitted in a black dress jacket, white cravat tied in an intricate knot, and a brilliant red and green plaid kilt.

On her father's arm, she almost stopped in the center of the aisle, but he continued, and she had to walk or be dragged. Why would Finn risk another run in with the law by wearing that bloody kilt again? And in London, of all places? When she reached the altar and stood beside him, she couldn't help staring pointedly at the kilt then raised an eyebrow.

Before Mr. Moss, the rector, could begin the service, Finn leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Dispensation granted by Lieutenant-General Rothes. Yer soon-tae-be husband is no' a criminal."

Smiling broadly, Dora raised her face to the rector as he began to intone, "Dearly beloved..."

The wedding breakfast followed immediately afterward at Judith's townhouse, with friends and family—even Finn's sister and her husband had been able to travel down from Scotland, thanks to the several weeks of delay. The two absent faces that Dora missed the most, however, were Tris and Violet. With her advanced pregnancy, Tris had refused to even consider such an arduous journey. They had sent Dora a lovely letter of congratulations, with hearty wishes for a blissful life for her and Finn. When she and her new husband made their way back to Scotland, they would, of course, spend time

visiting their dear friends, who had helped bring them together.

To complete her happiness, Dora had received a letter from her servants at Bromley wishing them happy and assuring her all was well at the estate. As soon as Dora had arrived in London, she'd written to Hanson asking for details of Lieutenant Scarlet's last visit. In his letter of congratulations, her butler informed her that despite the soldier's brutal tactics, the only injury sustained by anyone had been Alfred's wrenched shoulder, which had already mended nicely.

As the breakfast wore on, Finn kept glancing at her and smiling. When she'd visited with or at least spoken to everyone at the party, Dora took her husband's hand. "Is something the matter, Finn? You keep smiling at me in that rather strange manner."

"I only wondered if ye'd tired yourself out, lass. I've never seen ye flit about, like a butterfly, sae tae speak." He scanned the room, but Dora saw nothing she should be alarmed about.

"I don't want to be rude, husband. The bride must speak to her guests." Why was he acting so odd?

"Because if ye dae feel tired, Judith told me there's a room upstairs where ye can lie down for a while." The gleam in his eyes made Dora gasp and catch her breath.

"You want us to go upstairs and... While our guests are—"

He took her hand and kissed it. "Ye shouldn't neglect yer health, sweetheart. It's been almost a week since ye've had a proper rest."

Heart beginning to race, Dora glanced around the room. Everyone seemed to be preoccupied with the food or one another. No one seemed to be seeking them out at all. And they were married, everything signed and legal.

She grinned at Finn and nodded. He led her quickly into the corridor then Dora picked up the skirts of her new blue silk gown, and they fled up the stairs, laughing all the way.

He led her to the cozy room, where the bed was just as inviting as last time. Finn stroked her cheek, his soft touch making her want him with every fiber of her being. This day, their love, could only get better and better.

“Finn, I have a sort of wedding gift for you.”

“Dae ye, my dear?” He pulled her to him and grazed a kiss across her lips. “I have one for ye as well.”

She smiled. “I believe I can guess what that one is. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart.” Turning her back to him, she leaned against him and drew his arms around her. “Would you like to see my gift to you?”

“Aye, I would.” He kissed his way down her neck, making her shiver with the thought of the delights yet to come in this room. “Will ye show it tae me?”

“I will, but you have to wait a little while.”

“Hmm. I hope it wilna be too long, lass. My gift wilna wait for long, ye know.”

Dora giggled. “It won’t?”

“Nae, ye see, ye’re going tae get tae find out firsthand what’s under a Scot’s kilt.”

She laughed loudly. “Now that will be a gift I treasure for years to come.”

“Aye, we both will. But where’s this gift o’ yers?”

“Right here.” She took his hands and placed them over her stomach.

“Here?” The puzzlement in his voice tickled her. She couldn’t believe

it either.

“Yes, Finn.” She pressed his hands gently to her body.

Suddenly he went rigid, his hands frozen in place. “Dora? Are ye saying...”

She turned to face him, her smile from ear to ear. “Our trysts in this room have apparently borne fruit. At least, I believe so. My courses are very late indeed. That’s never happened before, so I think, Lord Aberfoyle, I may be carrying your child.”

“Och, Dora.” Face filled with awe, Finn seemed incapable of further speech.

“It’s rather lovely to think about, isn’t it?”

“I love ye sae much.” He grasped her to him in a fierce hug then gasped and gingerly let her go bit by bit.

“You will not hurt me or the child with hugging me. Or loving me.” She took his hand and led him to the bed. “Love me, Finn. Make me yours for all time.”

He kissed her then, all the love she’d ever longed for in his lips, in his heart, in his soul. “Ye *are* mine for all time, Dora. My countess, my lady, my love, my life.” He picked her up and laid her on the bed then crawled in next to her.

“So you like your present?” She kissed him, holding nothing back.

Something stirred under his kilt.

“I dae, *mo chridhe*. It is the best gift I’ve ever received, saving ye.” Finn deepened the kiss and his kilt moved again, something hard brushing against her hand.

“Then I hope you don’t mind if I open my gift.” Sliding her hand

under the kilt, she stroked his already rampant member until Finn groaned loudly. “And play with it.”

Gasping, Finn grabbed her hand. “Aye, lass, but let me show ye how it’s done.”

THE END

About Jenna Jaxon

Jenna Jaxon is a bestselling, multi-published author of historical romance in periods ranging from medieval to Victorian. She has been reading and writing historical romance since she was a teenager. A romantic herself, she's always loved a dark side to the genre—a twist, suspense, a surprise—and tries to incorporate all these elements into her own stories. She lives in Virginia with her family and three rambunctious cats, Marmalade, Sugar, and Olive. When not reading or writing, she indulges her passion for the theatre, working with local theatres as a director. She often feels she is directing her characters on their own private stage.

Jenna is a PAN member of Romance Writers of America and is very active in Chesapeake Romance Writers, her local chapter of RWA.

She equates her writing to an addiction to chocolate, because once she starts, she just can't stop.

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A Countess of Convenience

Captivating Countesses Book 1

Prologue

Cambridgeshire, March 1762

“We’re here, my dear. You’re home.” Dora Harper heaved a sigh of relief as the carriage stopped before the front door of a stately Tudor manor house, grateful to have arrived in time. Judith, her sister-in-law, could die in peace, at home in the arms of the parents who loved her.

The silent figure in the corner of the carriage, insensible as always, gave no response.

Dora hadn’t expected one, not really. Although, deep down, she hoped Judith was happy to be home at last. The grueling three-day journey from Dora’s home in Wiltshire, near Devizes, where Judith had resided since her marriage eight years before, had seemed to have little effect on the pitifully thin woman. Caring for the invalid with only one maid, however, had taxed even Dora’s seemingly boundless strength and patience to the breaking point. They would all enjoy a rest here at Ruecroft Manor before Dora continued her own journey northward.

“Hastings,” Dora called to the coachman, “please inform Mr. and Mrs. Welbourne—”

“Judith?” A high, quivery voice rent the brisk air as a woman’s face filled the carriage window, wreathed in a broad smile. “Judith, love, it’s your Mamma.”

Judith stared straight ahead, quite unaware of her mother’s frantic words.

“Larkin, help me raise her up. Perhaps if she sees her mother, it will help in some way.” Dora grasped her sister-in-law’s right arm as her maid took the left, and they pulled Judith into a sitting position. She had little hope this would make a difference, but sight of her parents must do it if anything would.

Hastings opened the carriage door, and the Welbournes surged inward, trying to grab their daughter to them.

“She cannot walk, Mrs. Welbourne.” Dora held Judith by the shoulders as her legs slithered out the door. “Hastings, can you manage?”

“Yes, miss.” The brawny coachman scooped the slight frame into his

arms.

Mrs. Welbourne burst into tears. Her husband scowled but gestured toward the open door of the house with his silver-tipped cane. "Take her in there, to the parlor on the right."

Led by Hastings, the little procession mounted the single granite step and hurried past the startled butler into the warmth of a cozy room with a well-laid fire. Rough beamed, white-washed walls brightened the gloom of the day, and Dora sighed in relief as the coachman settled Judith into a large, comfortable-looking chair near the fireplace. "That should be fine, Hastings. Thank you. You can take the carriage around to the stables." With Larkin's help, she began to remove Judith's cloak.

Mrs. Welbourne settled into the chair beside Judith's, not taking her gaze off her daughter's face.

"Thank you, sir." Mr. Welbourne nodded to the coachman. "Inman, have James show him the way. And ask Mrs. Walgrave to see that Miss Harper's maid has everything she needs." Judith's father sent one more stricken look to his daughter. "I'm going to the library, my dear. Let you and Judith...settle in here and I'll make sure Mrs. Walgrave has her room prepared." His lips thinned then he limped out of the room, followed by Hastings.

"We're just so shocked at Judith's condition, you see, Miss Harper." Mrs. Welbourne dabbed at her eyes then leaned over to pat Judith's hands. "So very shocked. Lady Downing wrote to us, of course, in November that our daughter was ailing, and has sent several notes to apprise us of her progress." She stared at her daughter's vacant face and sobbed anew. "But your mother never hinted Judith was so desperately ill."

"I'm very sorry for that, Mrs. Welbourne." Dora could've shaken her mother for keeping Judith's true condition from her parents. "I believe she thought Judith would rally with time and didn't wish to worry you unduly." More likely, her parents had not wanted the expense nor inconvenience of having the Welbournes arrive at Harper's Grange to take care of their daughter. "Unfortunately, she has not regained her sensibilities since the accident."

"Accident?" The distraught mother stared at Dora, a frown darkening her face. "I thought... Your mother wrote that Judith had fallen ill. Did she

have an accident?"

As Dora had feared, her mother had lied to Mrs. Welbourne about the circumstances of Judith's illness. "Yes, ma'am. She...tripped in her bedroom and fell, hitting her head on the corner of the hearth." The statement was mostly true, at least. "She was unconscious for two days, but finally she opened her eyes. I was sure then she would recover." Dora cast a fond glance at the woman who'd been her only friend in her parents' house. "But she's not been able to do much ever since."

"Can she speak at all?" Mrs. Welbourne stroked a lock of hair off Judith's face.

"Some random words now and then." Not terribly encouraging, but better than complete silence. "Occasionally, she will say Simon's name."

"Does she know?"

Shaking her head, Dora sighed. "I don't think so. I did tell her when he died, but I don't know if she understood me or not."

Judith and Dora had been the only members of the family not rendered prostrate by her brother Simon's death. Her parents had mourned their only son so deeply the entire house had been draped in black crepe. The servants had been required to dress in black and no visitors had been received since that awful day in late January when her brother had breathed his last.

Dora thought it supremely just that Simon had died of a blow to the head after his treatment of his wife. And that another of his victims—Violet Carlton, now Lady Trevor—had dealt the blow that eventually killed him.

"And Anna?" Mrs. Welbourne raised hopeful eyes to her.

Dora shook her head. "Unfortunately, nothing has changed since I last wrote to you."

A knock at the door startled Dora, who looked inquiringly at Mrs. Welbourne.

"I asked the local physician to come by this afternoon, in hopes Judith would be here. I wished him to see Judith now that she will be his patient." Mrs. Welbourne sent a sad smile to Dora. "I'm not sure what he will say when he sees her. What I told him was completely incorrect."

"A new opinion may be the very thing Judith needs." Another doctor certainly couldn't hurt after the abysmal care rendered by Mr. Norris. He'd bled her poor sister-in-law so many times Dora wondered the woman had any

blood left in her at all.

“A very new opinion, my dear.” Mrs. Welbourne nodded vigorously. “Lord Farrington has just come to the area. Let us hope he can cure Judith where your doctor could not.” The lady looked eagerly toward the doorway, at which Inman had appeared.

“Lord Farrington, ma’am.”

A tall, brown-haired man, with an air of no nonsense about him, strode into the room. “Mrs. Welbourne, good day to you.” He looked inquisitively at Dora then turned his gaze on the still figure attired in the deepest black of full mourning.

“My lord, so good of you to come.” Mrs. Welbourne stood to present Dora. “Miss Harper, may I make known to you our excellent physician, Lord Farrington? My lord, Miss Harper is Judith’s sister-in-law and has accompanied her all the way from Wiltshire to bring her back to us.”

“My lord.” Dora dipped a curtsy. Rather curious to meet a peer who was also a physician.

“Miss Harper.” He bowed elegantly. “Delighted to meet you. Many thanks for assisting Mrs. Harper on her journey home.” He turned toward Judith, and his lips tightened. “I see it was not a moment too soon.”

Mrs. Welbourne’s face drained of color and she stepped to Judith’s side. “What do you mean, my lord?”

The gentleman sat immediately to Judith’s left and lifted one of her hands. “She’s very pale and her pulse is weak.” He turned to Dora. “Has she been bled during the past week?”

Slowly, Dora nodded. “The day before we left.”

Farrington shook his head. “There are those who deem it beneficial. I do not. Based on my observations during my time at the medical college in Edinburgh, it seems to more often weaken the patients than strengthen them.” He looked into Judith’s eyes. “Does she follow any commands?”

Dora shook her head. “No. None that I have ever seen. She will open and close her eyes and speaks infrequently and with no sense to her words.”

“Any response to pain?”

“She always jerked her arm when Mr. Norris began to bleed her.”

The doctor nodded and laid Judith’s hand back on her lap. “Mrs. Welbourne tells me her daughter fell ill in November. What were her

symptoms?”

Dora cut her gaze over to Mrs. Welbourne then squared her shoulders. If it would somehow help Judith recover, she would tell the truth, no matter that her mother and father had forbidden her to do so. “She did not fall ill, my lord. She fell and hit her head.”

Lord Farringdon frowned and turned his scrutiny on Mrs. Welbourne. “You did not know the circumstances of your daughter’s illness?”

The anguished mother wrung her hands. “No, my lord. Not until Miss Harper’s appearance this half hour ago.”

“Someone has been very remiss in their duty to inform you about your daughter, ma’am.” The physician’s pursed lips and flashing blue eyes made Dora shrink back in her chair. He peered closer into Judith’s calm, dark eyes, lifting her eyelids one after the other. “Were you there when it happened, Miss Harper? Did you see her fall?”

Squirming as though she sat on hot coals, Dora gripped the arms of the wingback chair. “I didn’t see it happen, my lord.”

The hesitation in her answer, however, gave away what her words did not.

Beneath frightfully knitted brows, Lord Farringdon stared her down. “But you know what took place all the same, do you not, Miss Harper?”

Dora dropped her gaze to her knotted fingers and whispered, “Yes.”

“If I am to help Mrs. Harper, you must tell me exactly what happened.”

Swallowing hard, Dora looked up at the doctor and Mrs. Welbourne. “I was outside Judith and Simon’s chamber in the townhouse in London.” She shot a glance at Lord Farringdon. “Simon was my brother and Judith’s husband.”

The doctor nodded impatiently. “And?”

“I heard them arguing violently and then there was a hard slap...” She darted her gaze to Mrs. Welbourne then closed her eyes. “Then there was a loud thud, and Simon began to call for help.” She released her fingers, which had begun to cramp. “I found her lying on the marble hearth, insensible.”

Gently, Lord Farringdon turned Judith’s head this way and that. “Was there bruising or a mark afterward?”

Miserable, Dora nodded. “A horrible bruise on her right temple and a

smaller one on the left.”

“Did your physician treat that in any way?” The doctor scrutinized Judith’s right temple then brushed her hair aside, prodding her skull.

Wrinkling her nose, Dora replied, “A paste of arnica flowers applied to the bruise twice a day.” It had a strong pine smell Dora couldn’t forget. “And the bleeding, of course.”

“He did not try an operation of any sort?”

“No, my lord.”

The doctor’s lips had thinned to a stern line. “Idiot.”

Dora and Mrs. Welbourne exchanged a glance, and the older woman leaned forward, hope in her face. “Is there something that can be done, my lord?”

Lord Farringdon sat back in his chair, hand cupping his chin, lost in thought. “If she survived the journey here, she could likely also tolerate the trip to my surgery,” he mumbled, completely unaware of the two women. “Or I could have my instruments fetched here.” He glanced around the room. “Can she be moved to a bed, please?”

Mrs. Welbourne clasped her hands, her face rapt. “Do you know some remedy for her?”

Dora spoke almost at the same time. “What are you planning to do, my lord?”

“If what I suspect has happened, the cause of Mrs. Harper’s malaise is a build-up of pressure in the cranium.” He looked from one mystified face to the other and said, “There is likely bleeding in her brain from the fall that is causing pressure within her skull. That pressure is affecting her ability to move and speak.”

“And you can cure that, can’t you, my lord?” The anguished plea in Mrs. Welbourne’s voice made Dora’s heart hurt.

“There is an operation I can perform that might give her a chance at recovery, but I have to tell you, Mrs. Welbourne, grave risks accompany it.” Lord Farringdon stood. “She might not survive the operation. But neither will she live long if something is not done for her.”

“What do you propose to do?” Dora rose as well. If there was any way to help Judith, she wanted to help.

“The procedure is called trepanation. I would cut,” he paused and

took Mrs. Welbourne's hand, "a small hole in Judith's head to let any blood trapped in her skull escape."

Dora's gasp of surprise echoed loudly in the quiet room.

Mrs. Welbourne's eyes grew large and round. "Wha...what did you say?"

"It is not an uncommon operation, ma'am. It can be completed in a relatively short period of time." The physician's soothing voice exuded calm. "And if successful, it could give your daughter a real chance at life again."

Mrs. Welbourne dragged her gaze from Lord Farringdon to Judith's immobile face and staring eyes. And finally settled on Dora's. "What do you think, Miss Harper?"

Unwillingly, Dora looked at Judith. She had come to intensely dislike attending her sister-in-law once the accident occurred because it saddened her to remember the charming, vivacious woman she'd known so well. If there was even a chance that the old Judith could return, shouldn't they take it? "I think Judith would not wish to remain as she is now, for however long or short a time she would live. I believe if Lord Farringdon says we should try the operation, then we should."

Farringdon gave her a kind smile. "Thank you, Miss Harper, for that vote of confidence." He turned to Mrs. Welbourne once more. "It must be your decision, ma'am. Yours and your husband's."

Tears pooled in the woman's eyes as she nodded. "I'll tell Mr. Welbourne what you have said, but he will agree with me. We must do all we can to return our daughter to us." She stood and straightened her shoulders. "You will do it here? Now?"

"Yes, as soon as I send to my surgery for the instruments. My coachman will know what to tell my assistant." He strode into the foyer. "He will return with both shortly. Can you have Mrs. Harper moved to a bed, please?"

Mrs. Welbourne nodded and sat beside her daughter, taking her hand.

"Is there some way I may be of service to you, my lord?" Dora followed the man into the foyer. "Or Judith?"

"Yes, Miss Harper." Lord Farringdon stared into her eyes, and her heart stuttered at the gravity she saw there. "You can pray."

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